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IT WAS A MOMENT OF SUPPRESSED BUT EXCITING EXULTATION FOR FOUR PERSONS IN THAT BOX.

Prince Monte Cristo in New York;

OR,

THE CONSPIRATOR DETECTIVE

BY J. C. COWDRICK.

ENTREE ACT.

AN OATH OF FEALTY.

"Swear ye, then, that ye will guard with your lives the secret of this room."
"So we do swear."

Thirteen figures in black, in a dimly-lighted room. In the center stands one clad in a long, loose, sable robe, with a cowl of the same covering the head. Whether man or woman cannot be told. On each side of this person stand six others. Each is armed with a sword, and now, as together they utter the words, they raise their swords and cross them over the head of the person standing in their midst.

"It is well," speaks this person. "Back, now, to your posts, and see to it that ye observe well the oath ye have taken."

The swords are lowered, and the twelve bow and turn away, six in one direction and six in the opposite, leaving their liege the only occupant of the room. Doors are heard to close and then all is still.

CHAPTER I.

THE "PRINCE" AND THE "QUEEN."

Society was in a flaming furore over two grand attractions. One, Signorina Vasari, the renowned prima donna; the other, Prince Monte Cristo, a petted "lion" of the elite.

Both were recently from Paris, and later from London, which cities, according to society report, they had literally taken by storm. And it was an open secret that the "Prince" was enamored of the queenly songstress.

Certain it was that he had appeared in Paris soon after her debut in that gay capital, and the same thing had occurred in London; while here, in New York, a week after the appearance of the gifted prima donna—lo! the advent of the "Prince." And now, Gotham was as completely "taken" as Paris and London had been.

Two inquiries were the questions of the hour, one, "Have you heard the peerless Vasari?" The other, "Have you seen Prince Monte Cristo?"

To admit that you had neither heard the one nor seen the other was to confess that you were behind the age in which you lived, while an admission that you had heard the "Queen," but had not yet had the pleasure of seeing the "Lion," or vice versa, was to incur a sarcastic chiding, with the reminder that your cup of joy was only half-filled.

The newspapers devoted considerable space, daily, to recording the doings of these two personages, and within a week there were "Vasari" gloves, "Monte Cristo" hats, "Vasari" fans, and "Monte Cristo" canes, and a hundred and one other things similarly named.

In speaking of the prima donna's "hotel," the word is used in its French sense. She occupied a private house and kept her own retinue of servants. Her house was one of the finest of the many brownstones on Murray Hill, and there was scarcely a minute during her "at home" hours when carriages of the "four hundred" were not to be found before the door.

It was the same with Monte Cristo. He had brought furniture with him from Paris and London, and was established in a house of his own, which was second to none in the city in points of interior costliness and splendor. And, like that of the prima donna, his hotel was fairly besieged with the beau monde of the great city during his known reception

hours, which he had fixed to suit his own convenience.

The "Prince" was a young man, apparently not over twenty-three, and about the medium in height. His hair and eyes were black, as was his fine, graceful mustache. He was ever faultlessly dressed, and always cool and easy in manner. There was something about him that drew people to him and made them his friends.

The "Queen" was set down at twenty-five, in point of age. She might have been younger, but certainly was not older. She was above the average height and proportions, but her movements were so easy, and her manner so graceful, that, with her queenly presence, this was not noticed. She was good-looking, but not beautiful. Her eyes and brows were black, and her wealth of hair was of a very dark bronze-brown. She was educated, refined, and could speak fluently five or six languages.

It was the afternoon of a pleasant fall day. The air was just cool enough to be bracing, and the fashionable drives were thronged with gay equipages of every description. And, not only so, but the sidewalks were almost crowded with promenaders out for an hour's airing.

Among the latter were two men with whom our romance has to do. Both were stylishly dressed, and evidently moved in the "upper circle." One was about thirty-five years of age, tall, dark, but fairly good-looking, yet with an easy, well-bred air.

The other was younger, not so tall, light of complexion, and good-looking, decidedly. He was about thirty, and, like his companion, bore the stamp of the "caste" to which he belonged.

The first mentioned was Hector Browden, a man of limited wealth, but one who clung tenaciously to his social position. The other was a scion of wealth, who had been born in the very lap of luxury. His name was Laurence Weldron.

"What!" Browden exclaimed, "you have not seen the Prince yet!"

"I must own to the enormity," Laurence acknowledged, smilingly.

"Then you are not keeping pace with the times, that's all," Browden commented. "Why, he is the lion of the hour."

"Yes, I know he is; but that does not alter the fact in my case. I must meet him, however, for I am told that he is a very prince of good fellows."

"So you will find him, I assure you. And, as for wealth, he simply rolls in it. Have you heard the latest?"

"I presume not, being so far behind the times that I have not even seen the Prince. What is the latest?"

"Why, the Prince has actually bought up one night of the opera, out and out, paying an almost fabulous figure. He intends employing the occasion as a grand reception to his friends, and no doubt it will be a splendid affair."

"It will be something unique, certainly. Are the invitations out yet? I am growing interested, you see."

"No, the cards are not out yet, and it is known only to a few favored ones. It is to be a ball and opera combined. The floor is to be cleared, and dancing will be one of the features. Then there is to be a huge midnight supper in the—Hall, with covers laid for thousands. Oh! it will eclipse anything that New York has ever seen."

"I should say so. By the way, what is the real name of this Prince Monte Cristo?"

"I do not know what it is. Nobody knows. He is a mystery to everybody, and even the newspapers have not been able to solve the enigma. It is believed that he is a royal personage taking a little fling incog."

"No wonder the city is in such a craze. I begin now to feel a desire to see this mystery myself."

"He is expected on the drive this afternoon. That is the reason of the

crowd here, beyond question. Everybody wants to see him. Perhaps Vasari will be out, too."

"Will the crowd be able to stand it? laughingly. "But, say, what is causing the stir just ahead of us there?"

"It is the Prince, as I live!" Browden exclaimed. "That is his turnout, and there is not a finer one on the avenue. See! now you can get sight of him!"

He it was, Prince Monte Cristo, the "Lion of the Elite." His face was bright, and as animated as a woman's. He was faultlessly clad, as ever, and looked to be enjoying the hour to the full. His eyes were well about him, and every moment, almost, his smile and bow greeted an acquaintance.

While the two men looked, and while the Prince was yet approaching, the point where they stood, he was seen suddenly to lift his hat and make a more gracious bow than usual, as he recognized some person in a passing carriage. The two men naturally turned their attention to that carriage for a moment, and young Weldron exclaimed:

"Why, it is Dianthe Marxham!"

"It is no other," agreed Browden. "And, have you not heard?" he quickly added. "It is whispered that she is fairly captivated, and that the green monster is beginning to rage in the breast of her lover, Lewellyn Dalorme."

No time was given for comments then. The two carriages had passed, and the "Prince" was coming abreast of the two friends. Suddenly his quick eye caught sight of Browden, and he saluted, Browden doing the same.

Barely had this exchange of civilities been made, when a great excitement arose. Women screamed, drivers shouted, and Browden and his companion, looking quickly around, beheld a team of spirited horses plunging wildly, to the imminent danger of the person in the carriage to which they were attached, as well as the occupants of the other carriages at hand.

The occupant of the carriage was a veiled woman, and Browden had just time to utter in the ear of his friend the one word, "Vasari!" when there came a crash. The prima donna's carriage had collided with that of the "Prince," and was wrecked! But, before the crash came the "Prince" had sprung to the ground, and now had the Song Queen's horses by their heads, holding them as with arms of steel, while he addressed her driver in no mild tones in a language that no one else in the crowd could understand. In a few moments the horses were quiet, the driver was at their heads, and Monte Cristo was at the side of the wrecked carriage. The occupant was not harmed, and addressing her in English, the "Prince" offered her the use of his carriage to take her home, an offer which she accepted, and inviting him to accompany her, the two were speedily driven away from the scene.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE GRAND OPERA.

Five hundred dollars for a ticket!

It did not seem possible, but it was true, nevertheless.

The mammoth opera house was crowded; almost every available place was occupied, and the sale of tickets had been stopped.

In truth, there had not been much of a sale at the office that evening, for the whole house was sold, or nearly so, for a week to come.

There was a great crowd in front of the building, and thousands—it is safe to say thousands—had been turned away. A sign was up, announcing that the house was full and the office closed.

But that sign, and the information it gave, did not deter a young man from pushing his way through the crowd, as soon as he sprung from his carriage, and when he had passed the line of policemen that guarded the entrance, by what means no one could guess, he boldly ap-

proached the office window and knocked loudly.

He had to repeat his knock two or three times before any attention was paid to it, but finally the window was opened a little way, and he was requested to state what he wanted.

"I want a ticket," he said. "I must have it."

"No more tickets can be sold," was the answer. "Didn't you see the—"

"I saw nothing!" was the emphasized interruption. "I want a ticket, I must—I will have it!"

"You can't get—"

"See here," a little more agreeably, "I am Laurence Weldron, son of Senator Weldron. I'll give you a hundred dollars—"

"I am sorry," with a great coming down from his previously high manner, "but the house is jammed. There is not a seat to be had anywhere. I am very sorry—"

"There is always room for one more, I know," Laurence interrupted. "Once I get inside I'll be all right. I'll find a corner somewhere. Come, I'll give you two hundred—two hundred and fifty—"

"No, no, we don't want your money, sir. I would gladly favor you if—"

"I tell you I must go in. Here, I'll give you five hundred dollars for a ticket. You can't sell me a seat, I know. That is understood. All I want is to get where I can see and hear."

"Well, with that understanding, that I merely sell you admittance, without any promise of a seat or even convenient standing-room, here you are."

The money was paid, the ticket taken, and the last person admitted into the house that night was Laurence Weldron. And he it was who had the honor of giving such a sum for standing-room in the crowded aisles and lobbies of the temple of fashion and song in the Great City.

As soon as the young man had made his way into the house, he found that it was full indeed. There was barely standing-room, as the agent had told him. But he had expected to find it just as represented, so was not taken aback. With gentle effort, and with words of excuse and cravings of pardon here and there, he worked his way into as favorable a position as he was likely to find, and stood there.

A minor part was being rendered, and little attention was being given to the stage. A buzz of conversation was going on, and the boxes drew more attention than the boards.

Laurence Weldron brought his glass to bear upon the boxes. He looked to find familiar faces in some of them, and he was not disappointed. There were the VonDervelt family and their party, and in the box opposite were—Was it possible? He could hardly believe it at first, but there they were—Hector Browden, Dianthe Marxham, Rowena Hymilton, and one or two others.

"Egad!" the young man exclaimed, "how has he afforded it? But, he has not afforded it, as I ought to know. Some one else has bought that box, perhaps Miss Marxham herself. But, how is it she is here without Dalorme? They have been inseparable. But, I forgot Monte Cristo—Ha! no doubt it is he who owns the box! A good chance for me to meet him, if I can get Browden's eye."

At that moment a wild cheer arose, and all eyes turned to the stage; the prima donna had just appeared.

Weldron gazed, and his heart beat wildly. Never had she appeared more beautiful! He was captivated—was in love with her! All thoughts of his almost affianced, Josephine Blarcombe, were scattered, and her vision fled from his mind.

The applause was wild. Almost every person in the house stood up, and for some moments all order was lost in disorder.

The prima donna bowed right and left,

with smiles of appreciation, and presently the applause abated.

As soon as comparative quiet was restored, the "star" took up her part, and those who had not heard her before, but had come prepared to admire, admired beyond their wildest expectations.

The rich, gushing notes of this veritable "Queen of Song" were surpassingly grand. They were easily sustained, swelling with full richness, and fading down to the softest tone without losing anything of their timbre and quality. They were delightful when loud, and delicious when whispered. And her acting was no less impressing and inspiring.

Perfect quiet reigned until she had ended her first part, when, with one accord, the entire audience rose and cheered, waving hats and handkerchiefs with the wildest enthusiasm. They were completely carried away by their emotions, and in this way found the necessary relief.

After that, the performance proceeded to the end of the act, when the tempest of acclamation broke out anew, and the prima donna had to appear in front of the curtain before it would abate.

When the end of that act came, Laurence Weldron once more gave attention to the box where Miss Marxham was. He now certainly expected to see the "Prince" with her, but was disappointed. The only faces there were those he had seen before.

Moving through the crowd, with that gentlemanly grace that made room for him easily enough, he approached an usher, and putting a five-dollar coin in his hand, sent his card to Browden.

The golden chain put wings to the usher's feet, and in a moment he was back with an invitation to young Weldron to join the party in the box.

In a little time he was there, and seated in one of the very choicest nooks the house afforded.

"This is an agreeable surprise," greeted Miss Marxham.

"It is certainly an agreeable change from standing up," laughed the young man, in response. "To whom am I indebted?"

He looked to Hector Browden for reply.

"You are indebted to Miss Marxham," Browden quickly responded.

"But indirectly to Prince Monte Cristo," the lady hastened to add. "We are his guests for the occasion, but are deprived of his company. A telegram called him away as we were about taking carriage, but he insisted upon our coming without him. We hope he will be able to rejoin us."

"I sincerely hope so," said young Weldron, "for I want to meet him."

"Were you without a seat?" asked Browden.

"Yes, and almost without standing-room. I was the last person admitted."

"Whew! I thought you had tickets."

"Not for to-night. I have them for every coming performance, however."

"Why, you are really selfish," remarked Miss Marxham.

"Perhaps I am," was the smiling rejoinder.

"And it was you who used to have no interest whatever in opera!" observed Hector Browden. "You have been suddenly converted."

"There is no use trying to deny it," confessed Laurence. "Such singing is enough to convert anybody. Am I not right, Miss Marxham?"

"You certainly are," was the assenting answer. And the others in the box echoed the assent.

"I agree with you all, fully," declared Browden, then. "I will go further. Signorina Vasari would be charming, even could she sing only half so well as she does. You are not the only one who is charmed, Laurence."

The curtain rose, and the prima donna held the stage alone.

Immediately the applause began again, and bouquets of choicest flowers were

cast at her feet till the front of the stage was like a bed of roses. Most of those present had never seen anything like it. It was to them like a new revelation in the world of art.

Laurence Weldron could only gaze in admiration, at first. To him she appeared the most beautiful being he had ever seen. She was good-looking, but not beautiful, so his enthused imagination was at fault.

But what mattered that? He saw her with eyes of love, and love, it is said, is blind to imperfections. He rose and joined in the applause heartily.

The songstress saw him, and gave him an especial smile. He had no bouquet to offer, but did have a single rose in his lapel. That he plucked out, and threw toward her, bowing.

His throw was even better than he had hoped. Instead of falling at her feet, the rose went higher, catching in a fold of her sumptuous robe, near her hand.

Immediately she removed it, and held it in her hand during the entire act.

Weldron was almost dizzy with his commingled emotions. Was it possible that his new-born passion was shared?

"Laurence, my boy, I congratulate you!" exclaimed Browden, as soon as the singer retired. "You will be a lion second only to Monte Cristo. You have won a recognition from the Queen that surpasses anything bestowed upon any other of her admirers."

"You will be an object of envy," declared Rowena Hymilton. "Go in to win, as the sprightly saying has it, and I wish you all success."

The others present joined in with similar congratulations.

"Oh, it means nothing," Laurence averred. "It was only a passing whim. You will see that she has discarded the rose when she appears again."

"Yes, we shall see," agreed Browden. "And if she has not—Well, it will be your victory, my boy."

"Can it be possible that she has mistaken me for Monte Cristo?" the young man suggested.

At this, Dianthe Marxham's face grew white, then red, and she leaned back in a friendly shadow. The suggestion almost made her hate the signorina, in whom she saw a rival.

"No, impossible," assured Browden. "She knows you well enough."

Ere long the prima donna reappeared, and the little red rose nestled in the folds of lace over her heart! Laurence Weldron scarcely knew how to contain himself. Josephine Blarcombe was as dead to him as though he had never seen her!

"What did I tell you!" exclaimed Browden. "Monte Cristo will have no chance against you, my boy, mark it!"

It was a moment of suppressed but exciting exultation for four persons in that box, and their emotions were such as the reader, following the thread of our romance, will presently understand.

CHAPTER III.

THE CLAYBURN MILLIONS.

Old Zaccheus Hamman was a lawyer of good standing—at least that was his reputation, whether deserved or not.

True, an almost forgotten something in the dim past had not been altogether savory, but it was now so far in the past that its shadow was nearly lost.

The old counselor was a little, weasel-faced man of nearly seventy years. His head was completely bald, but covered with an ill-fitting wig, sand-colored and resembling tow, rather than human hair.

His office, which he had occupied for more than forty years, was in a dingy room in a dingy building on an out-of-the-way down-town street. But it answered the old attorney's requirements, so he clung to it.

It was the afternoon of the day mentioned in the opening chapter, and the old practitioner was beginning to prepare to close his desk and business for

the night, when he heard a step coming along the hall.

The door opened, and a stylishly-dressed man entered, closing the door after him.

It was Hector Browden.

"How d'e do, uncle?" he greeted.

"Oh! is it you, Hector?" was the response.

"Yes, I, as you see. Did you think you were going to have a client, and do a stroke of business? Ha, ha, ha! I guess your day for that sort of thing is past, Uncle Zack."

"I suppose you are right, Hector, I suppose you are. But I have a piece of work to accomplish before I go the way of all mortals. You know what that piece of work is."

"You refer to the Clayburn millions?"

"Of course, of course. Have I not been carrying that matter along for these forty years? Haven't I seen the heirs drop away one by one, by death, till now, out of more than thirty, only five remain? And from thousands apiece for them, it has now become millions. Think of it! Millions!"

"I have been thinking of it, uncle; in fact, I haven't been thinking of much else. It's about the same with me as it has been with you, only not so much so. You, watching all these heirs pass away, had your mind so fixed upon them that you did not realize that your old clients must have been sharing the same fate. It has not so completely blinded me."

"It is true, Hector, true, every word. This great matter has come to be the one thought of my life. I know nothing else, think of nothing else, dream of nothing else. There these millions lie, with their interest piling up every year, while it needs only a stroke of the pen, by me, to make five persons princely rich."

"And still you will not do it."

"Still I put it off. Old Anthony Burry can't last many years longer, and at his death there will be but four. Two millions apiece! Oh! I must hold on a little longer, just a little longer!"

"But while you are waiting, suppose you yourself turn up your toes?"

"My will provides for that. I turn all my affairs over to another, who will have the same power I now hold in this matter."

"And that person is—"

"No matter who, my boy. You have tried to find out that before, but you can't. I keep that a secret. Your business in life is, to see that you come in for a share of this wealth."

"Exactly; and that is what has brought me here now. I begin to see a ray of hope ahead in the matter."

"You think there is a chance for your marrying Emily Woolruff, or possibly the other one, Josephine Blarcome?"

"Don't mention the Woolruff girl! You know she is beneath my station. All my hope lies with the other one. Besides, Emily is only a child. Would you have me wait for her to become a woman?"

"I considered it the easier way. She'd be easier to win, and her part of the fortune will be as large as the other's."

"I know. I might do it, if no other way opened, but now the other way begins to look brighter. Josephine's lover seems to be slipping away from her, after all, and there may be a chance for your worthy nephew yet."

"But, you told me she was about as good as engaged to that young Laurence Weldron. What is the trouble?"

"Have you heard of the singer, Signorina Vasari, whose name is upon every lip?"

"Yes, I have had the name dinned into my head till I am sick of it."

"Well, young Weldron is going wild over her, and you may be sure I am not trying to show him the error of his way. In the mean time, the fair Josephine mourns, and will not be comforted. But, her pride will rally, and then if the right man is on the spot at the right

time, his chance will be good. I'm going to play my points to make myself that right man if I can. See?"

"You are a general born!" the old man exclaimed, catching hold of Browden's arm. "Push the game for all it is worth, and your share of this great fortune is assured!"

"And that is not all of it," the younger man persisted.

"Not all of it! What more is there to it?"

"Well, I believe that Rowena is going to have just about as good a chance as this of mine promises to be."

"What! Rowena Hymilton, too! Oh, but this is good! Tell me, though, where do you think her hope lies? Is it with Henry Dentway? Or is it with the other fellow, Lewellyn Dalorme?"

"Lewellyn Dalorme is her man. If she plays her hand well, she may land her fish. You see, Dianthe Marxham, with whom Lewellyn is madly in love, is as crazy after this new society lion, Monte Cristo, as he is called, as young Weldron is after the great Vasari; and it will only need for Rowena to strike when the iron is hottest to carry the point and win."

"It shall be done, it shall be done!" the solicitor cried, with enthusiasm. "Now that the way opens before us, we will go forward and win. Oh, the very thought of it does me good! I have lived for this, and this alone, almost. You must win, Hector—you and Rowena, and nothing must stop you."

The younger man smiled at the old conspirator's earnestness.

"Never fear but I'll go in to win, uncle," he assured.

"Good, my boy, good! Listen, while I tell you something of the story."

"Oh, I have heard it till I know it by heart," the younger man interrupted.

"You have heard much of it, but have never heard it all."

"Well, go ahead, then."

"It is not a long story. When old Howell Clayburn died he was worth several millions. His will was a peculiar one. His grandfather had come to this city many years before, a poor man. He made a fortune, which he left to one son, all the rest of his children being cut off with little or nothing. That son doubted it, and having only one child, Howell, left it all to him. Now, this Howell Clayburn was a peculiar man, and conceiving the idea that his grandfather had not acted justly toward his children, he, in his will, left the fortune to be equally divided among all the living descendants of the original Clayburn. Howell himself had never married. Now I was in the height of my fame at that time. Clayburn put this whole matter into my hands, leaving me accountable to no one, or virtually so. It was a big trust, for a young man, but I willingly assumed it. And then began the search for these legal heirs. It was a genealogical hunt, tracing from the original Clayburn down to his youngest descendant. I was at that time enamored of Gertrude Hilltown, and trying hard to win her hand in marriage. What was my surprise to learn that she was one of the heirs! Without pausing to weigh the matter, I told her. That knowledge sealed my fate, so far as hope of winning her was concerned. She accused me of mercenary motives in wanting to marry her, in which she was entirely wrong, but the idea once in her mind, it was there for all time. She discarded me. Then she demanded the money willed to her. I invited her to prove her identity. That was where I had her! I had the proof, she had none! She lost the case, and I laughed at her. It almost cost me my reputation, but I outlived the storm, and the money is still in my hands, and without me, not a single one of the heirs can prove identity as being descended from the original Howell Clayburn. This is something that I had not told you. There are only five of them left, now. I made a vow that, balked myself and

unjustly accused when I was innocent, not a penny of the money should leave my hands till it could be enjoyed by the children of the Hamman blood as well as those of the Clayburn. Now, only three of our stock remain alive; myself, you, and Rowena Hymilton."

CHAPTER IV.

ISAAC SHARPE, DETECTIVE.

At that point, the old man stopped for breath.

The younger man looked at him intently, evidently deeply interested. He had learned something not known before, that his father's uncle held this affair of millions so completely in his own hands; the secret and the treasure-key all his own.

Old Zaccheus looked at him sharply, and smiled as he noted the awakened interest.

"I knew I could interest you," he observed. "There are more possibilities in this matter than you have ever dreamed of, my boy. Perhaps you begin to see there are, and no doubt you begin to realize that even if you can't marry as you would like to, you and Rowena, these millions may not be beyond your reach."

Hector Browden's eyes dilated. In his mind came vague schemes of which he had never before dreamed.

"I don't know whether I understand what you are hinting at or not," he said.

"Well, it don't matter, it don't matter," the old man waived. "The business on hand is, for you and Rowena to marry these heirs. If that proves a failure, then we shall see what we shall see. Do you know, my boy, I have come to look upon this wealth as almost like my own? Do you know that it would kill me to have to give it up? It is so! And yet, Zaccheus Hamman has the reputation of being as reliable as an old clock. So he is. He is to be relied on in this matter of millions, my boy, I assure you. Time was, Hector, when the thought of holding back one penny of it would have caused me a blush. But, that was before I was cast off by the only woman I ever loved. She imbittered my life and changed my very nature. I balked her from getting her share, out of pure revenge. You and Rowena were coming upon the stage then, and my mind was becoming fixed in my purpose. And all this time the heirs were dropping out, one by one, and the shares for the remaining ones were growing bigger at every death. Do you wonder that I hate to give it up at this late day?"

"And why need you give it up? Will it not be possible to impersonate some of these dead heirs—"

"Shh!" the old man checked, leaning forward with raised finger. "Such a thought must not be whispered. If it should ever become necessary, then—But, the better way is for you to marry one of the heirs, and Rowena another. Then there can be no dangers of being ousted. If anything should block the present plan, then it will be time enough to look up another."

"If I can win Josephine, you will bring this case at once to a close, and bestow her share of the fortune upon her?"

"Yes, when Rowena has had a fair chance at the other heirs. I must not forget her, you know. She is as near to me by blood as you are. She must have all the time she wants."

"Well, but suppose I win and she fails, or the other way about, how will it be in that case?"

"There must be no failure; bear that in mind. Both of you have two chances, and you must win one or the other. She must capture either Dalorme or Dentway, and you must carry off either Emily or the other. It matters not which, so far as the money is concerned."

"And how many of these five know that the money is coming to them?"

"Not one of them, to my knowledge. That is where my fine playing shows.

I know all about them, but they know nothing about me and the millions. Why, if they did, they would no doubt wear my sill off running here."

"Likely enough, and especially true of the poorer ones of the five. But, say: as these persons do not know they are heirs, and it is only through you that they could prove their identity as heirs, could not two other persons, say myself and Rowena, lay claim to the whole and carry it off, with your aid?"

The hands of the old shark trembled, and he pressed them together while he gave thought to the suggested scheme.

"It would not do! it would not do!" he demurred. "The proofs would have to be presented to the court. You might prove your identity all right, with my help, but that would expose our strong hand to the others. One little clew would put Anthony Burry into his rights. He is a grandson of the original Clayburn. And the others might catch right on and follow his lead. No, no; the easiest way is the best, by long odds, and that is my plan. Do not doubt that I have weighed every point. Any one of the rightful heirs could get a stay put to the matter, and there you would be—floored!"

"I see, I see. No doubt you know more about it than I do, so I'll take your advice. Still, if all these heirs were dead, and the situation yet remained the same, then—"

"Not to be thought of, not to be thought of for a moment," the old fellow protested. "These young persons are just as likely to outlive you and Rowena as they are to outlive me. Besides, I want to see the matter settled before I go away to rest—honorably settled, you see, as it will be if you and Rowena only do your parts."

"You are right. That is the only way. If that fails us utterly, then— But, some one is coming!"

Steps sounded in the hall, coming nearer, and finally stopping at the lawyer's door.

The door opened, and a thin, wiry-looking, hawk-faced man entered.

"Isaac Sharpe!" the old counselor exclaimed.

"At your service, noble patron," the newcomer responded, and he dropped into a chair.

"Well, and what brings you here?" the old lawyer queried. "Anything special?"

"Nothing out of the usual course—that is, nothing startling. It is a month since I was here, so I have come to report and draw my pay."

"Then a month has slipped by! I had not noted it. How the days do flit along! Well, what is your report? You may speak right out before Hector here, for the matter is no secret from him."

"Very well, just as you say. Hence, let me read my report from a page of memory, as follows, to wit: Isaac Sharpe, detective, to Zaccheus Hamman, lawyer, greeting. For another month a careful watch has been kept upon five persons, according to instructions. These five persons are, namely: Anthony Burry, Emily Woolruff, Henry Dentway, Josephine Blarcome, and Lewellyn Dalorme. The first named is in his usual health, and still in the knife business on Broadway. The second can be said to be the same, in point of health. Still keeps house for her grandfather. Sings like a bird. Of late an Italian named Signor Vanzini has been watching her movements rather closely. His intentions unknown as yet. The third, named Henry Dentway, is still a reporter on the Daily Earth. Nothing to mention. Josephine Blarcome not so near an engagement as she was thought to be at last report. Her lover seems to be strongly drawn toward the new comet, Signorina Vasari. Same with Lewellyn Dalorme. His lady-love seems on the point of bestowing her affections upon the social mystery—Prince Monte Cristo. No other facts

worth mention. My bill to date—one hundred dollars. Shall be pleased to be of further service at the same rate. Very truly yours, Isaac Sharpe, detective."

In a lively manner he rattled it off, and when the end was reached the stop was as abrupt as the beginning had been prompt and sharp.

The old lawyer said nothing, but opened his desk and drew forth an envelope, from which he took out some bills, handing them to the detective.

"Another month?" the detective asked.

"Another month," the lawyer answered.

"Good enough," wadding the bills down into his vest pocket. "You will find me reliable, and my reports correct. If anything of importance turns up, you shall hear of it promptly. Good-after-noon," and he was gone.

Browden looked at his uncle in undisguised surprise.

"Something more you did not know, eh?" the old man hinted, smiling.

"Exactly," was the curt response.

"You will learn more and more as you grow older. Sharpe has been in my employ for several years. I know the doings of those heirs as well as I know my own, I may say."

"I don't see how you can know much, from such reports, if what I heard was a fair specimen. I don't remember half the fellow said. I doubt, too, whether you remember it yourself. What did he say, anyhow? Burry as usual, granddaughter the same, but watched by an Italian—what do you make of that?"

"I don't make anything of it," was the rejoinder. "That is my detective's business. He will keep an eye upon the fellow, never fear. But, come, it is growing later than I thought. I must close up. You want money, of course; you always do; take this," handing out a liberal sum, "and let me see you in a day or two," and he waved Browden toward the door.

The young man at once departed, and as he passed along the hall, a look of devilish cunning came into his face, while he glanced back toward the office door with a smile of such unfeigned evil as changed the pleasant-faced man of society into a Lucifer unmasked.

CHAPTER V.

A VERY HUMBLE HOME.

It was a street where poverty reigned, and in the Italian quarter.

In one of the big tenements, and in the fourth story of it, two of the windows were strikingly different from their neighbors, for pots of plants and flowers were standing upon little shelves on the sills, and snowy curtains within.

The other windows were dirty, broken, for the most part uncurtained.

Day was drawing to its close, the day of the incidents in the previous chapters. Sons of toil were wending their way homeward. Idlers were lounging at the corners, and in one spot especially was a crowd, drawn there and held by the power of a remarkably sweet, childish voice in song.

The notes came from the big tenement, and it was but natural that the voice should be associated with the two sunny windows where the flowers bloomed, for it was from one of those windows, which was open, that the bird-like warble came, in notes so clear that they could only be likened to the tinkle of pure-toned bells.

Presently the singing ceased, and, a moment later, a girlish face appeared at the open space above the flowers, looking up and down the street, searchingly.

On the other side of the way, and nearly opposite, stood a dark-faced Italian, a man of middle age, short, thin of visage, but well dressed in a suit of black.

He had been listening to the singing, nodding his head approvingly now and again when the sweet young voice turn-

ed a difficult note successfully, and now as the girl's face appeared at the window he took off his hat, placed his left hand upon his breast, and made a most deferential bow. And, not satisfied with that, he replaced his hat and began to blow kisses toward the girl from the tips of his fingers.

She did not see him at first, but, presently, as her eyes fell upon him a flush mounted into her cheeks, and, quick as thought, she made a "face" at him and dodged back out of sight.

Several noticed it, and a laugh arose immediately at the Italian's expense. But he seemed to care nothing for that, and rubbed his hands together in a satisfied way.

"Ah! eet ees all-a-right," he muttered. "Ze leetle signorina she sing-a-like a bird; she haf ze grand-a-voice. Soon she s'll be-a-mine, and-a I will make her ze prima donna grand-a! She haf ze voice of ze great-a Signorina Vasari! Ah! but eet will be ze grand-a effort of a lifetime!"

With that he walked away, and, after one last look, he turned a corner and disappeared from the scene.

This was Signor Vanzini, the man mentioned by Detective Sharpe to Lawyer Hamman.

And it would be readily inferred that the girl was Emily Woolruff.

Looking in upon her, in her apartments in the big tenement, we see a rather pleasant-faced girl of about fourteen. She is tall for her age, not ungraceful, but of course only just budding into a possibility of future grace and loveliness. She is of the brunette type.

The rooms, though poorly furnished, are neat and clean, and in one a table is set for supper. It affords no display, unless a display of poverty, but the cloth is white, the dishes shining, and a pot of tea steams gratefully on the back part of a little stove. There are plates on for three.

The girl looks with solicitous care to something that is in the oven of the little stove, and evidently finding it all right, closes the door partly, and breaks out in lively song, rendering a bar or two of some popular air.

No wonder Signor Vanzini, an accomplished musician, recognized the possibilities of such a voice as this of poor and humble Emily Woolruff.

Presently the girl moved again to the window and looked out and down. And this time her search was rewarded, for she drew back immediately, after giving a wave of the hand to some one.

"He's comin' at last!" she observed, to herself. "He's a little late, and I was beginnin' to think the pie would be too much done, but I guess it'll be all right. Don't see anything of Old Weeks with him, though."

She had thrown the oven door wide open now, and was arranging the cups preliminary to pouring the tea.

Heavy and slow steps were soon heard on the stairs, then along the hall and toward the doors, which, presently opening, admitted a man, whose age must have been nearer seventy than sixty. His shoulders were bent, and his hair was white, but his wrinkled old face had a kindly smile that age could not touch, unless to render it more benignant.

Under one arm he carried a folding stool, and under the other a long, flat box, fitted up with legs after the manner of the stool. This was Anthony Burry, known as "the knife man." He had his stock in trade with him, for he was one of those merchants to whom the adjective "curbstone" is fitted.

The old man's grandchild ran quickly forward and relieved him of his load, and then greeted him with a kiss of welcome and affection.

"How are you to-night?" she cheerily asked; "pretty well, but pretty tired, eh?"

"That is just about it, Emily, just about it. My! but this is a haven of rest when I get here! You do have things so bright and homesome! And, ah! what is it I smell? Not a mutton pie?"

"That's what it is, granddad, you bet!" was the glad assurance. His quick appreciation had amply repaid her for all the labor the pie had cost. "That's what it is, and as soon as you've washed, you can jab your fork into it for all you're worth. Only you mustn't stuff too full, you know; you'd only be worse off."

Her speech was quick, cheerful, but unrefined. It exhibited nothing of education, save the education of the street, with its vocabulary of "slangy" words and more "slangy" phrases.

"No use to warn me about that, not a bit," the old man declared, as he set about washing his hands and face. "You can't stop me when I git started at a mutton pie."

"But this is Gabriel's night at dinner, ain't it?"

"Yes, it's his night, but you ain't goin' to let your pie spoil while you wait for him. If he don't know when it's dinner time here, let him take up with things as he finds them. You sha'n't eat cold pie, for him, so there!"

The old man laughed merrily at this little scolding.

"All right, all right, my little housekeeper," he exclaimed. "It shall be as you say, only I hope he'll be on time. He 'most allus is, you know, so mebbly he'll turn up by the time we begin."

They had just taken their seats at the board when a step was heard without.

"Ha! he's here!" the old man exclaimed.

The door opened, and another aged man shuffled into the room. He looked even older than Anthony Burry. He was bent, and had white hair and a beard of the same color. Like Anthony, too, he was rather shabbily dressed, but cleanly.

"Blessed little spot of wayside rest," he exclaimed, reverently clasping his hands and looking about the room. "We'll remember these little rests, Anthony, boy, in the long Eternity."

The next moment his hands unclasped, the two old men embraced affectionately, and then Gabriel Weeks greeted Emily.

"Bright ministering angel!" he exclaimed, as she gave him her hand, "your reward is not only promised, but assured."

In a few moments more all were seated, Gabriel asked a blessing upon the repast, and his aged host proceeded to "jab" the pie.

For some time the merits of that pie was the subject of conversation.

"And how is it with little Emily?" asked Gabriel Weeks, presently.

"Oh, I'm kickin', as usual," was the cheery reply.

"And can sing as well as ever, no doubt, eh?"

"Oh, I can warble some, you bet. But you can't guess the latest. You couldn't guess in a week. I have had an offer of marriage!"

As she made this startling announcement she leaned back in her chair, thrust her thumbs in her armpits, and spread out her hands.

CHAPTER VI.

A PROPOSAL REJECTED.

"An offer of marriage!" cried Gabriel.

"Oh, it's a fact, sure as you live!" the girl mirthfully assured.

"What manner o' foolishness is this?" demanded Anthony.

"No foolishness about it," averred Emily, laughing. "It means real business, right from the letter B; and, what is best of all, my suitor is a real, live count!"

"It's that skunk of an Eyetalian again, that's who it is!" exclaimed the grand-

father, bringing his fist down upon the table with a thump. "I'll wring his scraggy neck for him. What business has he got to talk of marriage to a mere child—the foreign vagabond!"

The girl broke into a merry laugh.

"I'll bet on you, granddad, every time!" she exclaimed. "He wouldn't be of much 'count—I mean much of a count, after you'd got through with him. But, wouldn't you like to see your Emily a real countess?"

The old man's expression was troubled. Could it be that his grandchild was in earnest? Had her head really been turned by that foreign rascal's honeyed words?

"My child," old Anthony spoke, "I must believe that you are only jesting. Anyhow, I hope you are. You must not listen to a word that man says to you. You must not even let him speak to you again. What he tells you is only lies, lies!"

The girl laughed merrily again, her laughter having all the music of rippling waters.

"And she is only jokin', I can see she is," observed Gabriel. "She was only teasin' you a little, Ant'ny, boy. But, what is all this about? Who is this 'ere Eyetalian?"

"Of course I was only foolin'," confessed Emily. "That is, I was foolin' in askin' granddad how he'd like me to be a countess. It's true that the Eyetalian wants me to run off and marry him, though. Ha, ha, ha! it makes me laugh to think of it."

There was no smile on the face of her grandfather. He saw only danger ahead for his cherished grandchild.

"I knowed it, Anth'ny, I knowed it," cheered Gabriel. "Little Em'ly has got too much sense to listen to sich stuff."

"You bet she has!" Emily herself reassured. "You'd 'a' died if you had seen the face I made at him just afore you came home, granddad."

"Was he here?" demanded Anthony.

"Oh, no, he wasn't here; he was out in the street there, and when I went to the window to see if you was comin' I seen him a-throwin' kisses at me, and I made the worst face I could pucker up."

"But, when was it that he made the offer of marriage to you? You didn't say anything to me about it last night."

"Oh, that was when I went out to the butcher's to get the mutton. He met me and stopped me, and went to tellin' me again how boss I kin sing, and a lot of stuff of that sort. He said that with trainin' I could soon outsing this Vasari that we hear so much about; and then he went on and said if I'd run away with him and marry him, he'd teach me to sing, and I'd soon be richer'n a queen on her throne."

"And what reply did you make?"

"Why, I just said 'Rats!' to him, and dodged past and left him there. And when I'd got my meat I went clear 'round the block and come home the other way, and he was standin' there yet a-waitin' for me. Oh, I got the bulge on him in great shape!"

"Then he didn't see you come back, eh?"

"No; he was star-gazin' the other way. The silly old monkey! I wish he'd let me alone."

"Yes, and so do I. He's got to let you alone, that's all; if he don't, there may be a way to make him. He's a villain and a liar, I know that, for a surety, my child." He uttered this with a good deal of vehemence.

"Of course he's a villain and a liar!" echoed Gabriel. "Nobody else would make such a proposition to a child. We know you kin sing, Em'ly, but you couldn't never hope to be a great singer; and, what's more, you needn't never want to. It's nothin' to boast of, as I kin see; hey Anth'ny?"

"Nothin' at all to brag of," the grandfather agreed. "She's greater singin' here in our poor rooms, nor what the best of 'em be singin' on the stage, is my

opinion. I hope you won't let no such nonsense fill your head, my dear."

"Oh, don't worry about it, granddad. If I'd thought you would, I wouldn't 'a' told you. He can't work any harm to me; I'd like to see him at it! He'll get sick of it and give it up—But, hark! somebody is comin'."

All listened, and a step was heard in the hall—a light step. "Them boots sounds like the monkey's!" cried Emily, excitedly.

"You don't mean the Eyetalian?" sputtered old Anthony. "Let him show his nose in this room, and I'll—I'll—I'll jab him!" And he picked up the well-worn knife with which he had been "jabbing" the mutton pie.

There came a knock at the door.

Now the two old men looked at each other, as if to ask what was to be done, and the girl waited for their decision.

"Mebby it ain't him," old Anthony spoke in low tones. "Open the door, Emily, and we'll see."

The knock was repeated; the girl sprung to the door, threw it open, and there stood—the very person they least wanted to see, the Italian!

"Ha! good-a eefening!" he greeted, removing his hat and making a very low bow, and at the same time coming into the room. "I hafe ze honor to meet ze Mistaire Burry, who ees ze grandfather of ze liddle singer?"

He had kept right on bowing, and when he ended what he had to say by way of a greeting, he had put himself on the other side of the table.

Old Anthony, as the fellow passed behind his chair, jumped around the other way and faced him.

"Who invited you in here, sir?" he demanded. "If you have any business with me, you want to have it done with and be off as soon as you can."

"That's the way to talk, Ant'ny," encouraged old Gabriel; "that is the way to show him who's master here."

"Bet your life," assured Emily. "That's business, old Macaroni, from the letter B."

The Italian stood with his hat in his right hand, and a look of great surprise upon his face.

"Pardon-a me, pardon-a me!" he exclaimed. "I hafe ze business, ze very important business. Eet ees only with ze intentions most honorable I come-a here. Will not ze Signor Burry hear-a me? I am ze Count Vanzini!"

"You don't count for much here," put in Emily, saucily.

Immediately the Italian made her a most telling bow, almost sweeping the floor with hat and hand.

"Eet ees with no cause to blush that-a I bow before ze beautiful signorina," he declared, "before which-a-who-a—How I say eet? Before-a her soon ze crowned heads must bow. She hafe ze voice much-a incomparable!"

"See here," cried the grandfather, his voice trembling with anger, "if you have got any business with me, say it quick, or else get away with you. You are not welcome here."

"I crave-a ze pardon. I come-a to you as a friend-a. I pray you not to be rash, but let-a me hafe a leetle moment to explain what-a I would say. In my own land I am a count, very reech in money and estate. Your child-a—I would say your grandchild—she hafe ze fine voice. Eet ees needful eet be trained, so she be ze prima donna ze most grand! I would-a marry ze lady, so that-a I might be her natural protector at-a all times, and train her voice so she sing-a like none ever sing be—"

"Get out of here, you rascal, before I do ye harm!" thundered old Anthony, holding the old knife in a threatening way. "Your very presence is an insult."

The Italian dodged around the table.

"Hold-a on, hold-a on!" he cried; "you hafe not heard-a me out! I would-a pay you big money, so you live like a prince, while-a ze lady learn. By

ze time she be-a twenty years, she sing like—"

But he was cut short.

"You miserable furren scoundrel!" cried the old man, "get out of here as quick as you can, or I won't be responsible for what will happen! Offer me money, would ye? Offer me money for that child! Why, you miserable dog of a Eyetalian, if I had my rights and this girl had hers, we could buy and sell you a dozen times over! Do you understand that?"

"But-a, let-a me explain—"

"Not another word! Get right out, or I'll run ye through! And don't never show yer head here again, or it will be worse for ye! And, don't you never speak to this child again, for if ye do I'll hand ye over to the police! You miserable furren dog, you!"

The fellow backed out of the room, and the old man slammed the door shut and turned the key, after which he dropped upon his chair, pale and trembling.

Emily and Gabriel looked at him in wonder. The same thought was in the mind of each. What meant this that he had said about "rights"? What did he mean by such a hint of wealth? It was something neither of them had ever heard of before, and which they probably would not have heard now, but for his terrible anger of the moment. There was no doubting that the old man held some secret. And the Italian, as he descended the dismal stairs, muttered to himself:

"Ha! what ees zis I hear? Ees eet possible that-a ze girl hafe wealth as well as voice? Eet ees worth-a my time to find-a out."

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER CALLER.

"The miserable furren dog!" grated the veteran, bringing his fist down upon the table with force. "If I had been twenty years younger, I believe I would have thrown him through the window!"

"Well, he is gone, so don't give him any further thought," the young girl advised. "If he comes here again he'll get a warm reception, you bet! But, say, granddad, what was you meanin' when you talked about our buyin' and sellin' him?"

"Something that I was going to ask myself," put in Gabriel. "I have knowed ye a long time, Ant'ny, and never heard a word of this before. Mebby ye was only sayin' it in yer anger, though. Mebby that was all."

Burry had clasped his hands in front of him on the table, and was gazing abstractedly at the remains of the mutton pie on his plate.

Presently he looked up, fixed his eyes upon Gabriel Weeks, and demanded:

"Gabriel, how long have you knowed me?"

"A good many years, Ant'ny, a good many years."

"An' have ye ever knowed me to tell what wasn't so?"

"I believe I never have, Ant'ny."

"Then ye have no reason to think that I've said what ain't so now."

"That's so, Ant'ny—that's so! I only thought that mebby in yer anger ye had fired out that way onthinkin'ly."

"Not by any means, Gabriel. Only for my anger, though, I wouldn't have mentioned it. But now it's out, I'll tell the whole matter."

"Then there really is something in it!" exclaimed Emily. "Am I a princess in rags, or something like that? Oh! Tell us about it, granddad, for I'm just dying now to know about it."

"It was for your sake that I have been keeping it locked in my own breast all these years," returned the old man. "That is to say, of late years it was owin' to you; before that, owin' to your dear mother. I wouldn't have her nor you put any hopes in a thing that is never likely to be realized, you know."

"Oh, you needn't worry about me!" the young girl cried. "I guess I can stand it, granddad, so out with it! It won't do me any hurt to dream about rings on my fingers and bells on my toes, I guess, when I have time to do any dreamin'."

This bit of pleasantry caused the old fellow to smile.

"I ain't in much of a mood for talkin', not just now, I ain't," he observed. "I don't feel right since that furren villain was in here. But he's gone, and let's try to forget him."

"That's what's the matter," coincided Emily. "But, granddad," she urged, "I am just dyin' for that story. Go ahead; and if you don't tell us right off quick, you'll have a funeral on your hands, sure. I can't stand it much longer."

"If that's the case, here goes. I am rightful heir to considerable of a fortune, my dear, and you being my only living descendant, would come in for it, if I died and anything ever come of it. But that ain't likely. It's too many years old now to be thought of. My grandfather's name was Howell Clayburn. He died rich, and left his money all to one son, his namesake. He died a good deal richer still, and left his money all to his only son, who bore the same name. Now, my grandfather had several other children besides his namesake, and when this last Howell Clayburn came to die, he left the money to be divided equally among the heirs of my grandfather. So, you see, I am one of the heirs."

"Good for you!" cried Gabriel.

"And how much is there of this boodle?" queried Emily.

"I have heard that it amounts to millions," was the answer, "but I don't know. Any how, it is a good big pile of money. But we'll never see it, so don't go to buildin' any castles in the air on the strength of it."

"And what's the reason we won't never see it?" Emily demanded.

"Just what I'd like to know, too," added Gabriel Weeks.

"Well, for several reasons," old Anthony explained. "In the first place, I cannot prove that Howell Clayburn was my grandfather. That's enough, without anything more. Then, I don't know who had the matter in hand. And for all I know, the case may possibly 'a' been settled long ago, and me counted out; but I don't think so, for if any fair hunt was made, I could 'a' been found."

"And why wasn't you found? Why wasn't it settled?"

These questions Emily put as sharply as a cross-examining lawyer might have done.

"How did you come to know anything about it?" asked Gabriel.

"To your questions, Emily, I don't know; to yours, Gabriel, I'll explain. I had a cousin named Gertrude Hilltown. She knowed about the matter, and went into the courts with it, but she didn't get anything out of it. She was like me, she couldn't prove a straight line to the old original Clayburn. But, there was more back of it than the mere trial, but what it was I never found out. I wasn't in this city at that time, and only heard it talked of by some of the folks. They're dead now, all that I ever knowed of 'em, though there may be a hundred relations of 'em alive. I don't know, though I wish I did."

"Then you never tried to get at it, eh?" queried Gabriel.

"No; what was the use? I hadn't money, and, if I had, I would be in the same fix my cousin was in. I couldn't prove myself an heir, and that would settle it. No, I reckon it's a dead letter, and that nothin' will ever come of it."

"I'll bet a smart lawyer would rake it up, if there's anything to rake," declared Emily. "And mebby he could find the proof you lack, too. If there's millions in it, as you say, there's many a one of 'em would only be too glad to take it

up on shares, and I'll bet my slippers on it."

The two old men looked at the girl in something of surprise. Such an idea from so young a head amazed them. They lost sight of the fact that she was old beyond her years, and that she was almost a child of the street.

"There is something in that," agreed Gabriel.

"Yes, there might be," coincided Anthony, "but it ain't worth the trouble at this late day. Once set the ball rolling, and heirs would come up by the hundreds, and the few dollars we might possibly git wouldn't pay for the wear and tear of nerve."

"Which shows that you look at it in two ways," cried Emily. "You told that Eyetalian monkey that we could buy and sell him if we had it, and now you put it down to a few dollars. Which do you mean?"

"It all depends," was the response to that. "If we happened to be the only heirs, which ain't likely by any means, then we'd be able to do it; but if there's five hundred heirs, more or less, then we would be about as well off without it as with it. But there's no use in thinkin' about it, so we'll let it rest for once and all. I'm sorry I was so thoughtless as to let it slip out. So, Emily, my dear, don't let this have any place in your mind. It can't come to no good. Let's talk about somethin' else."

Another step was heard in the hall.

Anthony Burry reached for the table-knife.

"If it's that furren villain," he grated. "I'll jab him, I vow I will."

"It ain't the count," decided Emily.

There came a knock at the door.

Anthony himself got up and opened the door.

A stranger stood there, whom none of them had ever seen before, to their knowledge. He was a thin, wiry-looking hawk-faced man. In fact, it was Detective Sharpe.

"Good evening," he greeted pleasantly. "Do I address Mr. Anthony Burry?"

"That's my name, sir," the old man responded.

"So I thought. Will you allow me to step within for a moment, while I make known my business?"

"To be sure. Come right in."

The stranger entered, closing the door.

"My business is something of a secret," he said, immediately, "and I would not have it made known. This gentleman is to be trusted, I suppose?"

"I trust Gabriel Weeks as I would my own brother, sir," declared Anthony, with pride.

"It was only proper to make sure, you know. You have had a caller this evening, an Italian named Signor Vanzini. He is interested in some way in your grandchild here. Will you tell me what his business was? Mind, this is to be secret; I am an officer."

Thus reassured, the old man told everything—how the Italian had heard Emily sing, and now wanted to marry her and train her voice. The stranger, when he had heard all, said:

"Glad to know this. You must pay no attention to him, Miss. I will have an eye on him. Mind, not a word about my calling here. Good night."

CHAPTER VIII.

SCENTING A MYSTERY.

When the opera was coming to an end, Browden proposed a supper at the leading restaurant.

This was agreed to, but, as the party stood, Weldron was without a companion. Browden was the escort of Miss Marxham, by the request of Monte Cristo.

"Dare you invite the prima donna to dine with us?" queried Browden, of Weldron, his tone bantering.

"That would be excellent!" urged Rowena Hymilton. "Do it, Mr. Weldron,

do it! You ought to strike while the iron is hot, you know," laughingly.

The young man was just in the mood for it. He had been wishing for some such opportunity.

"Dare I invite her?" he repeated; "I'll show you," and he took out his card-case, penciled the necessary words, and in a few minutes the message had been sent to the prima donna.

Laurence was excited and nervous, while Browden was eager, or more than eager.

The response soon came, and all knew what it was as soon as Laurence had glanced at the card, for his face lighted up instantly.

"Ha! No need to tell us what it is," exclaimed Browden.

"I must congratulate you," spoke Rowena. "You are certainly highly favored."

Young Weldron was overjoyed.

"It is more than I dared hope for," he remarked. "Perhaps the success was more due to the rest of you, than to me? Perhaps she looks forward to meeting Monte Cristo there?"

Just then another outburst of applause told that Vasari was again upon the boards, and their attention was given to the stage.

It was her final appearance for the evening, and the audience tried to outdo every previous effort in the way of enthusiasm. The signorina bowed again and again, and once she bestowed a nod and smile upon Laurence.

The act was nearing its end, when a message was handed into the box occupied by Miss Marxham and her friends. It was addressed to Hector Browden. He took it with an air of wonderment. Breaking the seal and glancing at the signature made it all plain. It was from Monte Cristo.

He regretted that he would be unable to rejoin the party again that evening, but bade them enjoy themselves without him. He sent especial regrets to Miss Marxham. Further, he informed them that a supper awaited them at Delmonico's in a private parlor ordered by him. He bade them attend to it, inviting whom they pleased, and closed with another expression of regrets.

Browden handed the note to Miss Marxham, upon whose face settled a shade of disappointment, if not actual displeasure, as she read. She in turn passed it to young Weldron, with the remark:

"This will hardly suit your notions, Mr. Weldron. It is something unlooked for."

"Egad, no!" exclaimed Weldron. "Invite the Queen of Song to dine, and feast her upon a repast furnished by a rival? You are right in saying that it does not suit my notions, Miss Marxham."

"I hardly thought it would."

"Jove! I had not thought of it in that way!" Browden added. "It is rather rough on you, Weldron. What will you do about it?"

His was a delicate game to play. But, he had Rowena to support him.

"I see but one way out of it," she remarked. "We must divide our party, if that can be agreed upon. Under the circumstances, who could object?"

"That opens the way," cried Weldron, gladly. "How is the division to be made? Who will join me?"

A little fine playing soon arranged all. One of the couples would go with Weldron, the other remaining with Browden and Miss Marxham.

The opera ended and those in the boxes prepared to leave.

In a little time the signorina made her appearance, graceful, queenly as ever, and the situation was explained to her. That is, not as it had been discussed, but as the case stood. An invitation from Prince Monte Cristo, coming after that of Mr. Weldron had been extended, could not be slighted.

Vasari understood the situation readily, and the two parties separated with mutual expressions of regret.

In a brief time Laurence, the singer in his carriage, was whirling away in the direction of Delmonico's, the other couple following.

As they were starting from the opera house a young man advanced hastily to a cab that stood in waiting, and with a hurried direction to the driver to follow young Weldron's carriage, was about to spring in, when a hand fell on his arm.

Looking around he saw a thin, wiry-looking, hawk-faced man at his side.

"Ha! You, Sharpe?" he ejaculated.

"As you see, Henry, my boy," was the quiet response.

"Well, you'll have to excuse me now, for I'm in a rush after items. I'll—"

"Don't waste any time on my account," Sharpe interrupted, "I'll go right along."

"In with you, then, and we're off! I mustn't lose sight of young Weldron and the prima donna. It is almost the event of the week in the opera world. It is an honor she has shown no other man in New York."

They were in the cab and speeding away by the time this short speech was ended.

"Where are they going?"

"There is only one place in New York to go after the opera," the reporter reminded.

A reporter the young man was—none other than he whose name has found mention in a previous chapter—Henry Dentway.

He was a gentleman of thirty, or thereabouts, good looking, and with a dashing, busy, and breezy air that was needful for success in his line of business. He was of medium height, well built, and had the appearance of being active and strong.

"Where is the Prince?"

"I give it up," was the brief answer. "He hasn't been seen to-night."

"Do you know what kept him away?"

"Not yet. I sent a man to his house, and will probably learn something when I meet him at the office."

"The two have not met, yet, have they?"

"No, they have not met in society, yet. That event is looked for with keen interest. You read about the collision of their carriages, did you not?"

"Yes, and it was quite remarkable that the signorina was not hurt. That has no doubt won her deep gratitude to the Prince."

"I saw the accident. Was in my cab not far behind. I followed to the signorina's house. She was left at the door with every showing of politeness, but the Prince was not asked in, or, if he was, he did not accept."

"Where did he go then?"

"He drove to his own house, with all haste."

"Humph! It beats the devil."

"What are you talking about? What lay are you on, anyhow?"

"Oh, it's nothing worth mention, my boy. Merely gratifying my own curiosity, this time. Nothing you'd care a snap to know."

By this time the cab came to a stop at Delmonico's.

The cab had drawn up on the opposite side of the street, the reporter sprung out, said a hasty word of parting to the detective, and was gone.

"Yes, it beats the devil, and that's the fact, pure and simple," Isaac Sharpe repeated, this time to himself. "I'm going to know more about this, or I'll know less, one or the other. There's a mystery here as big as a house."

CHAPTER IX.

WHO WAS THE ASSASSIN?

Hence, when Laurence Weldron and his party entered the famous restaurant, it required but a word to place the best of the house as much at his disposal as though he owned it all. He was escorted to a parlor, and had nothing fur-

ther to concern himself about, except to get the most enjoyment out of the hour.

The signorina was full of life and gaiety, though in the most becoming manner was it displayed. She made Laurence feel perfectly at ease, and he drank in her every word and glance with eager delight.

The other couple lent their aid to the making of a merry evening.

About midnight the door of their parlor opened and a young man in evening dress stepped in, hat in hand. He was in the act of crossing to the table when he stopped short.

All eyes were upon him immediately, and he was, seemingly, a little confused, but it was only seeming, for this young man was no other than Henry Dentway, the reporter on "The Daily Earth."

"Ah! I crave pardon," was his apology, as he backed toward the door, bowing. "An unpardonable blunder, I assure you."

"Don't mention it," responded Weldron. "Mistakes will happen, you know."

Another bow on the part of the reporter, and he was gone.

Brief as had been his stay, he had taken in everything, and the moment he closed the door he whipped out pencil and note-book and made entries.

Passing on, he entered another room in the same manner. Here were Miss Marxham, Hector Browden and the others of that party.

"Have I made a mistake?" he remarked, as he stopped just within the door.

"That is for you to say, sir," responded Browden, civilly.

"It is quite evident I have," the reporter confessed. "I understood that Prince Monte Cristo was at supper here. I beg pardon."

"You have made no mistake," Browden assured. "We are the guests of Monte Cristo, but are deprived of his company. He was called away early in the evening by a telegram. He will not be with us."

"Thanks," and Dentway was gone before any question could be put to him.

Again did he make entry in his note-book, after which he went down to the cafe, where he found the detective.

Mr. Sharpe pulled out a chair and with a wave of the hand invited him to occupy it.

"I can stop but a minute," Henry observed, as he sat down.

"Stop long enough to try the wine," urged Sharpe. "It is excellent, see if it isn't. By the way, how are things going in the parlors above? Can the Queen of Song eat as well as she can sing?"

"Yes, from all appearances, the signorina can eat fully as well as she can sing. She seems to be enjoying herself thoroughly."

"Then there was no sign of any tears at the absence of the Prince, eh?"

"Not the least sign, I assure you."

"And the Prince, has he joined his party?"

"No, and is not expected."

"Good for you. Now, open your note-book, my young friend, and make just one little entry that Isaac Sharpe says it beats the devil and see if it don't come true."

"Ha! this is the second time you have made that remark," the reporter exclaimed. "What do you mean by it?"

"That is just what I would like to know. It is something that I can't understand."

"Why not let me in on the ground floor with you? Then we can work our way up together. Come, I have given you many a pointer, in my time, and you ought to be willing to share this with me, for I know you are interested in something."

"But if I don't know what that something is, how can I tell you about it?"

"Whom does it concern? You can tell

me that much, can't you? That will give me the clew to work on. Just name the party, and I'll be off."

"Can't do that. Keep your eyes open, my boy."

"I can't help doing that. Sorry I can't work an item out of you, but I see it's no use. Good-night."

"Ha, ha, ha!" the detective laughed. "I saw your game. Well, if you can make an item out of what I've said, go ahead."

"I'll know more of this matter, if there is anything in it."

Sharpe was about to respond to the reporter's good-night, when the report of a pistol rung out, startling them both.

The report was followed by a scream, and then by loud and excited voices, with hasty treading of many feet. The detective sprang to his feet, while Henry made a dash for the door to the hall, but the door was flung open, and a man dashed in, almost colliding with him, and making straight for the street, crying as he ran:

"Police, police! Somebody has been shot up stairs!"

Sharpe seeing that the man had on a waiter's apron, and was bareheaded, followed Dentway, who was springing up the stairs.

In the hall above all was confusion. Doors were open and people were questioning one another.

"Did you see that assassin, gentlemen?" demanded Laurence Weldron, addressing Dentway and Sharpe, as they appeared at the head of the stairs.

"No," Dentway responded. "Which way did he go?"

"We think he went down the stairs, but can't be sure, as he was out of sight before we got to the door."

"Did you see him?" asked Sharpe.

"Yes, I got a glimpse of him."

"What was he like?"

"Young man, dark face, and had on a waiter's apron and was bareheaded."

"Confound the luck!" cried Sharpe. "Why didn't I collar him, as I thought for an instant of doing!"

"It was the fellow who almost ran into me!" averred Dentway. "But who was shot?" he quickly added.

"Fortunately, no one," answered Laurence. "The shot was fired at one of our party, however, and we are inclined to think it was at Signorina Vasari. It came very close to her."

"Heavens! But that was fortunate. Where is the lady?"

"In the parlor."

"I must see her—with your permission. I represent 'The Daily Earth.'"

"And so must I," echoed Sharpe. "I'm a detective, and I may be able to run the fellow down."

Without waiting, Dentway entered the room where the signorina and the other lady of the party were.

The Queen was standing, but if she had been excited, did not show any sign of it now.

"Your pardon," addressed the reporter, "but do you know the person who fired that shot at you?"

"No, I do not know," was the sweet-voiced reply. "I cannot believe that it was fired at me, sir. It certainly did come very close to me, however."

No further light could be had, and the excitement abating, the reporter and the detective withdrew.

"What do you think of it?" Dentway asked, as they left the place.

"Just make a note of it, my young friend," was the answer, "that Sharpe says it beats the devil. You'll find that it does."

"Yes, I know, you said that before; but who do you suppose fired that shot?"

"Have you thought that it possibly might have been Monte Cristo?"

CHAPTER X.

GOSSIP AND SCHEMES.

The following afternoon a number of men were seated in the reading room of one of the fashionable clubs.

Among others were Laurence Weldron, Hector Browden, and one whose name has been mentioned several times in the preceding pages, Lewellyn Dalorme, a handsome, noble-looking man of thirty-three or thereabouts. He had a clear, fine eye, a well-filled face, and his proportions were superb. His hair was rather light, and he was toying with a heavy, curving mustache of the same color.

The conversation was upon the events of the previous evening. The newspapers had full accounts, especially "The Daily Earth," and there was plenty of food for gossip.

"And what is your opinion about it all, Dalorme?" Browden appealed, turning to Lewellyn.

"I haven't any opinion worth offering," was the civil response. "If the shot was really fired at Vasari, and everything seems to indicate that it was, it will be well for her to look out for another."

"Sense in that, certainly. But who can want to do her harm?"

"I am not good at riddles, my dear fellow."

"Well, it is a puzzle, truly. But, say, Weldron," turning to him, "don't you know more than you have told us?"

"I know no more about it than any one else," Laurence assured.

"Well, we look to you for a full report in the near future. You are a lion, now, second only to Monte Cristo."

"And where is poor Miss Blarcome?" a fellow with hardened nerve inquired.

Young Weldron grew red for a moment, but gave a careless answer to the intended thrust.

"The great singer has broken the tender tie between you and her, then, has she?"

"It is nobody's business but my own, and I believe I am of age. I don't account to any one for my doings."

"Good for you!" exclaimed Browden.

"You are envied by a thousand fellows in New York, Laurence. Hold your own, and go right in to win."

"Egad!" exclaimed the one who had first stepped on young Weldron, "you are welcome to your honors, my boy. A bullet is as likely to find you as the signorina. I wouldn't want to be in your boots."

"Nonsense!" cried Browden. "The sense of danger will make the flirtation all the sweeter. Go right ahead, Laurence. Why, all the fellows of your set are as badly stuck on the signorina as the ladies are crazy after Prince Monte Cristo."

Lewellyn Dalorme got up suddenly and left the room.

"Why, what the deuce has moved Dalorme?" Browden inquired. "He went off as if he had been sent for."

"Your remark struck him in a tender spot," was the ventured explanation.

"Ha! that's so, and I never thought of it. Too bad. But they do say that Miss Marxham has cut him clean for the Prince."

When Dalorme left the club he went up the avenue with hasty, nervous step.

An honorable and well-liked fellow was Lewellyn. Of good family, and quite well off, he was one of the well-known men of the circle in which he moved. And a marriage between him and Miss Marxham had been one of the looked-for events of the near future.

"It shall be yes or no, and that this hour," he muttered, determinedly. "She shall not play with my devotion in this way. If she is not willing now, she never will be, and if she is not willing to accede to my reasonable demand, perhaps I am making a fortunate discovery into her character before too late."

He turned into one of the cross streets, and presently sprung up the steps of a fine residence, to be shown into the parlor, a room where delightful memories lingered.

Dianthe Marxham soon appeared, but cool of manner and with an air of ennui.

She bowed to Lewellyn, and dropped upon a chair without offering her hand as heretofore.

Her caller lost little time in getting at the business that had brought him there.

"Dianthe," he spoke, "I am here to learn my fate. I am just from the club, and your name is being associated with this unknown fellow they call Monte Cristo."

A flush came upon the fair woman's cheeks, but whether of displeasure or secret satisfaction, he could not guess.

"Pray go on," she said, coldly.

"I love you, Dianthe, and ask you to become my wife. I want my answer here and now. If you will marry me, and will so promise, then you must break off immediately with that adventurer, and let me stand in position to defend your good name whenever I hear it mentioned in connection with his. What is your reply?"

"I have found the Prince to be a perfect gentleman, Mr. Dalorme," was the reply, "and I must resent the stigma you cast upon his name by calling him an adventurer—"

"Pardon me," Dalorme interrupted, "but do you know the name of this gentleman? If you do, you are ahead of everybody else in New York."

This time a flush of deeper hue suffused the woman's face.

"I must confess that I do not," she owned; "but is it not well enough understood that he is a royal personage? and that—"

"It is not well enough understood to satisfy me," Dalorme interrupted. "But we will not discuss that. I await your acceptance or refusal of my offer."

"Well, Mr. Dalorme, I will consider your proposal, and in a few weeks—"

"Now or never!" Lewellyn insisted.

"If you accept me, you must drop Monte Cristo. I will not await your pleasure, while you are holding a flirtation with him, and while your name—"

"Very well, then, Mr. Dalorme, we will have a definite understanding. I will not marry you. I will not be dictated to in the manner you have attempted."

"So be it," said Dalorme, as calmly as possible, though his face was pale as he rose to go. "I shall not trouble you with a repetition of my offer."

In a few moments more he was out upon the street.

"It is better so," he reflected. "Though I love her, yet perhaps it is fortunate that she has had this opportunity to show herself in her true light."

About that same hour, in another Murray Hill Street, Rowena Hymilton rung the bell of a fine residence and asked for Miss Blarcome.

She was conducted up to a little sitting room on the next floor, where the lady asked for generally received her more intimate female acquaintances.

Rowena sprung into the room with a little cry of delight, and caught Miss Blarcome in her arms, giving her a hearty kiss.

Josephine returned the caress and Rowena began to rattle away in her liveliest manner with the latest gossip.

"Oh, yes," she informed, "we heard Vasari last night. She is charming! I was perfectly delighted! We were the guests of Monte Cristo, you know. He invited Dianthe Marxham, and our party was nicely made up, when at the last moment a telegram made it impossible for the Prince to go with us. But he would not let us be disappointed. We went and occupied his box, but any one could see that Dianthe was awfully put out. Oh! but she is just bound up in the Prince. I feel sorry for Lewellyn Dalorme, don't you? He has lost Dianthe, that is certain, and if I am any judge, the Prince has captured her. Oh, yes, and who do you think joined us in our box? It was Laurence Weldron. Just think of it! he paid five hundred dollars for a ticket! It is dreadful, the way he is taken up with the prima

donna. And she seems just as much delighted with his company as he with hers. He came into our box, you know, and when the signorina saw him he tossed a rose to her, and she wore it all the rest of the evening. Then he invited her to dine, and she accepted and—. But you must know all about it. I do feel sorry for you, Josey, but were I in your place I would feel only too glad to know him as he is."

Half an hour that call lasted and for half an hour that strain was kept up. But finally the scheming Rowena took her leave, and Miss Blarcome breathed a sigh of relief.

"Why could she not have left me alone?" she sighed. "She must know that I feel the cut only too keenly. But no one shall know that I cared. And, perhaps she was right in saying it is better so. It is ended."

CHAPTER XI.

BROWDEN'S NOCTURNAL VISIT.

An out-of-the-way down-town street, little frequented in the daytime, is at midnight about as cheerless a place as can be imagined.

Such was the street upon which Old Zaccheus Hamman had his office, and about the most dreary part of the street was in the immediate neighborhood of the building in which the office was. The dingy old building was shrouded in shadows deep and dismal. Not a light was to be seen in any window on either side of the street.

Any person standing in the shadow of the building, half an hour after midnight, on the night following in order the events last recorded, might have heard a step at one of the corners, and looking, would have seen a man pass under the light of the street lamp. He went on, unobserved, to the front of the dingy building, and there stopped to listen. Hearing no sound, he drew a key from his pocket, opened the door and passed in, closing and locking it after him.

Lighting a match, he went up the stairs and along the hall to the door of Lawyer Hamman's office, where he listened again, before lighting another match.

Lighting the match, he scanned the keyhole carefully, and he inserted a key that unlocked the door. He entered, closing and relocking it, with the same care he had given to the street door.

Glancing in the direction of the one window of the office, he noted that the tight iron shutter was closed, and without further hesitation turned on the gas and lighted it.

The man was Hector Browden.

"Well, here I am," he mused, "in the old man's den, and now to find out what I can. It is just like him, though, to have things so hid away that nobody could find them. But, we'll see. I mean to know more about these Clayburn millions, if there is any way of learning it."

Near the window was a wide desk, the covering of which was worn through in front. Over the desk were shelves, containing books old and rusty. Behind on the other wall was a great frame of pigeon-holes, a full hundred in all, inclosed in part with glass doors.

In one corner stood a small, old-style safe, rusty, dusty, as though it had not been opened in many a day. Browden ran his eyes over the books first, but decided that they promised little.

From them his eyes went to the safe, and from that to the case of pigeon-holes near by.

"I'll look here first," he decided.

But the glass doors were locked.

"I might have known it," he muttered.

"But I can overcome this difficulty."

Producing a ring of keys, he tried one after another, and finally hit upon one that fitted and the doors were swung open.

The documents contained in the pigeon-holes were at his pleasure.

Under each of the little boxes was a label with a brief memorandum of the papers it held.

Browden ran his eyes over these rapidly, but none of these memoranda claimed a second glance. Most of them were easily understood, though some were remarkable for brevity.

Finally, away up in the left-hand corner of the case, he discovered a label that drew his attention.

It was lettered—"C. G. 1, G."

This was so different from the usual "A vs. B," "C vs. D," etc., order, that it called for a little closer inspection.

"What does it mean?" the man asked himself.

"Does it indicate anything that will interest me? Ha!" as his eyes rested upon the next label below, "I believe it is just what I am looking for."

That one was inscribed—"C. G. 2 G."

"Yes, that is it, to a certainty," Browden muttered. "Why, this whole end of the nest is full of it, now that I come to look. Curious it never drew my attention before. But, no, for these holes come under the end doors of wood when the case is all closed. Yes, that is what it means: 'Clayburn Genealogy, First Generation,' and so forth. I am in luck."

He took the papers from the first of the holes to examine them.

His guess had been correct. The papers, neatly arranged, referred to the original Clayburn and his family.

The place and date of his birth were given first; then a brief sketch of his life; then followed the name of his wife, date of marriage, and a list of their children.

Browden went over the names with care, fixing them in his mind, and noting the leading particulars mentioned in connection with each as he went along. And as he read and studied, the work began to grow upon him with something of fascination.

Presently he put those papers back and turned his attention to the second generation of the family.

Here he found a work of greater magnitude.

It did not take him long to discover that he would not be able to hold it all in mind.

Looking far enough to find that all of that generation were dead, he turned to the third.

In that generation the family tree was vigorous and promising, for a time, but there came a turn in its tide, and death began to make sad inroads upon it, twig and branch.

Following it on and on, the searcher came to the end, or rather emerged into the present, to find that only five of the descendants were then living.

"Wonderful!" he ejaculated. "The hand of fate has been against that family, surely. But, what have I gained by my investigation into this matter? I knew this much before I commenced."

Returning to their place the papers he had in hand, he ran his finger along that row until he came to a desired point.

Taking the documents from that place, he opened them for another examination.

"Elias Clayburn," he read, "third child of James. He was born in June, 18—. At the age of fifteen ran away and went to sea. Became sailor, but at the age of twenty was drowned."

"That settled the line of James," Browden commented. "The others were then dead. Elias was drowned fifteen years ago. I was then about twenty myself— Ha! He and I would be just about the same age, were he living! Drowned at sea— Is there proof for that?"

No proof was offered, but it was set forth as a conceded fact.

"Drowned at sea," Browden repeated. "Men have been drowned at sea before now who have afterward come to life."

Drowned at sea is about as vague a statement as can be made, and yet it is given here as having no points of doubt. Drowned at sea."

He became thoughtful for a long time.

"It could be done," he finally decided. "Should I decide to try it, Elias Clayburn would be my name."

Putting the papers back into their places, he closed and locked the hinged and folding doors, and sat down in his great-uncle's chair.

Two hours had slipped away while he was at his earnest research.

"Is it worth the cost?" he asked himself. "And the cost, what is it? It is the sinking of my own identity. The sudden disappearance, and forever, of Hector Browden. Is it worth that? Yes, decidedly. Better Elias Clayburn with millions than Hector Browden with nothing."

He sat thinking, thinking.

"And that is the only opening I could find," he mused, "in either the male or female line. It is the only pregnable spot in the armor anywhere. There is little chance for Rowena to play a similar role. But, time enough to think about that, for the other plan has not yet proved a failure. We must see what will come of that. And now, if I can, to find uncle's will."

He got up and looked about the office till his eyes rested upon the old safe.

"Ten to one it is in that," he decided, so arose and stepped over to it.

"But, will it do for me to open it? Or try to?" he queried. "The dust is so thick on it that it would be known that some one had tampered with it."

He had reasons for not wanting Zaccheus Hamman to know that he had been there, or to suspect that any one had. It would not do to disturb that dust, and its presence there angered him.

"Well, I can see to it that it is soon removed," he muttered. "Next time I come here when uncle is in, I will brush it off, with some passing remark or other that can never arouse any suspicion in his mind. I want to see what his will is. I want to know who will have this great matter in hand when he is gone."

He was suddenly startled by hearing a door close somewhere in the building.

Springing to the gas, he turned it out instantly.

"Who can be moving about in this old den at this hour?" he questioned. "I cannot afford to be discovered, whoever it is. I must be as quiet as a mouse until I am sure the coast is clear again."

Stepping to the door he listened.

Presently he imagined he heard steps, an— Yes, steps they were, and coming along the hall in his direction!

He drew back a little from the door, wondering who it could possibly be, and waited to learn which room the person would enter, or whether he would go on to the next floor.

What was his surprise, when a hand fell upon the knob of the door of the very room he was in, and he heard a key clicking against the lock!

Not a moment was to be lost now. With silent haste he felt his way to the office table, or desk, and, in a moment more, was under it, pressing as close to the wall as he could, almost holding his breath.

The door opened, and who should enter, bearing a candle, but the proprietor of the office, Zaccheus Hamman himself!

CHAPTER XII.

"MY GOD! WHAT HAVE I DONE?"

Hector Browden was in a tight place, and yet he congratulated himself upon one thing—that he had removed the key from the lock on locking the door when he had entered the office.

Mr. Hamman closed and locked the door, and then set the candle down on the table, or desk, while he dropped into his chair.

"It is strange, more than strange,"

Browden heard him saying to himself. "Why should I be so strongly impressed that something was wrong here? I might have known that I would find everything all right, but here I am."

A candle was a poor light for a man of Zaccheus Hamman's age, as he seemed to find, for he rose now and lighted the gas. This was better, decidedly, and he looked around with renewed interest.

The old man paced the floor, looking things over and over again.

"Strange, strange, strange," he muttered yet again. "It must have been my talk with Hector about the Clayburn millions that has been on my mind, and I have been dreaming. That is the only way I can account for it at all. The Clayburn millions are at the bottom of it."

He walked up and down the office in the space between his chair and the side where the frame of pigeon-holes was. And every time he turned Browden trembled lest he might be discovered.

Presently he stopped before the little old iron safe.

"If I had a suspicion that the papers would not be safe there," he mused, "I would take them out and put them somewhere else. But they are secure enough; they must be. Who would think of looking for anything of value in such a safe, and in the office of such an old and rusty lawyer as I am?"

He took another turn, but stopped before the safe again.

"Here are my will and securities for that vast fortune," he mused. "Who could ever dream that millions are held in so humble a receptacle? How thickly the dust has settled on the old safe! I would know readily enough if anybody had been tampering with it. I will open it and take a look at the papers. It must be a year since I opened it the last time."

Now the old lawyer was all activity. Taking a much worn duster from a hook, he dusted the top of the old safe. That done, the old man got down on his knees before the safe to open it.

Selecting a key, the old man applied it to the safe lock, and the door was lifted open. It was one of those old safes with its door on the top, hinged at the back much like a trap-door.

The safe opened, the old man plunged his claw-like hands into it, bringing out some packages of papers, which, getting up, he laid on the desk. Stepping back, he got more, and this time sat down in his chair.

Hector Browden, under the table, was full of excited curiosity. These were the papers he had most wanted to see, and see them now he would.

When they were returned to their place and his uncle had gone, it would be easy enough to get at them.

For quite a time the old lawyer was silent. Browden could hear the rustle and rattle of the papers, however, as they were opened and folded.

"And this is my will," he heard the old man mutter. "My last and only will. What if Hector knew he is to be my heir and my successor in the management of this affair of millions? It would not do to tell him, at any rate not at present. No, no; it must not be. I must see the business done before I lay down my head. This will is all right, however, in case of sudden death to me. If I live to see the matter settled, and Hector and Rowena married to the heirs, then the will can be destroyed, and another substituted. No, Hector must not know of it yet."

For a long time, then, and it seemed an hour to Browden, the old man neither moved nor spoke. Not a sound, not a movement came from him, and Browden was beginning to think he must be asleep.

At last, though, a long sigh was heard, and the old man moved in his chair.

"I will do it," he said, firmly. "The struggle is over, and I see my way all clear. I will wash my hands of the whole

business, at once and forever. And what better revenge could I ask, anyhow? Gertrude Hilltown, one of the heirs, would not make me happy, owing to this accursed money; it shall make no one else happy. Here and now I will destroy it, every security, every scrap, and my will and the Clayburn genealogy with it. This I will do, as I live."

With that he got up and paced the floor again.

Who can depict Hector Browden's emotions? His face had paled, a damp of perspiration was upon his forehead, and his breathing was hard.

"I will do it! I will do it!" old Zaccheus repeated. "It has been the curse of my life, as now I can see. It has been for this purpose that I was drawn here this night. I will do it, I will do it. I will allow it to blight no one else as it has done for me. I will destroy everything, wash my hands of it, close my office, retire to the seclusion of my home and there await the end. Hector may storm at me in his disappointment, and Rowena may rage, but I am determined. It is better so, for who knows but it might prove a curse to them both. It shall be destroyed."

Under the desk, Hector Browden was undergoing torture. Right and wrong were struggling for the mastery in his evil mind.

In his right hand was gripped a pistol, cocked, and murder flashed in his eyes.

"The old fool!" he grated. "Would he spoil everything when the game is so nearly won? He shall not do it, not if—"

His hand took a tighter grip upon the weapon, and he moved, ready to spring out at an instant's notice. His face was terrible to look upon. It was the face of a devil.

The old man took a few turns more up and down the office, and then, fully determined, he stepped to the desk, snatched up some of the papers, and turned to the gas to destroy them.

With a quick movement, Hector was out from under the desk, his collar up and his hat pulled far down, to escape recognition, and leveling his pistol at the old lawyer, was about to fire when Hamman turned around.

The old lawyer's hand was already lifted to apply the papers to the flame, but the noise made by Browden had checked him, and now, on turning, he was all but paralyzed with what he saw. Whether he recognized Browden or not can never be known, but a look of awful horror came into the yellow, shriveled old face, and he was on the point of speaking when the assassin fired.

With only a slight groan, Zaccheus Hamman sank down to the floor, dead.

The bullet had entered his heart, only too directly, and Hector Browden was a murderer!

For a moment he stood and looked upon his victim, unable to speak or move, in the first dread realization of what he had done. The next moment he was trembling, as with a chill, a cold perspiration ran down his face, his arms dropped to his sides, and, unable to stand, he sank limp and helpless to the floor.

"My God!" he gasped, "what have I done!"

CHAPTER XIII.

COVERING THE CRIME.

For some minutes Hector Browden was as helpless as a babe. The awful horror of what he had done was full upon him, and his very soul was paralyzed.

Finally he got up and sat in the chair.

"Heavens!" he gasped, "but this is horrible! Did I really mean to do it? Yes, yes, I meant to do it, of course," he admitted to himself. "I would do the same thing again under like circumstances."

Now he was coming to himself.

"The old fool would have spoiled ev-

erything, when we are so near the victory. Yes, I would do it again—I will do it again if any one comes between me and this fortune."

Naturally, his first plans now were toward his own self-protection.

At any cost he must escape suspicion that this crime had been done by him.

"How does it stand with me?" he asked himself. "I was at the club till after eleven. I can prove that by a dozen or more. From there I went straight home, where, fortunately, I met the landlady in the hall, and talked with her a few moments about the opera, from which she had just returned. She saw me go into my room and must have heard me lock the door."

For a long time he was thoughtful. He was studying the situation from every side, in order to come at the right conclusion. This was a time when no mistake must be allowed.

"Just the thing," he observed at last. "It is a case of suicide, of course. That is the easiest and the best. That will explain everything in a word, and perhaps the police will accept that theory."

His decision arrived at, he rose and set about the business of hiding under that guise the crime he had done.

He bent over the body of the dead man and looked to see where the bullet had found its lodgement.

There was the hole in the left side of the breast, but as he looked at it Browden saw one thing that would upset the idea of suicide.

That one thing was that there was no sign of powder around the hole, and the murderer knew very well that no man could shoot himself, holding the weapon in his hand, without leaving such marks.

In a case of suicide the person would be likely to hold the weapon within an inch or two of the body, even if he did not actually press it against himself.

This must be remedied, but how was it going to be done?

It was a question that cost the murderer considerable time and thought; then, picking up his revolver, he took out a cartridge and removed the bullet from it. That done, he put a very light wad of paper on the powder, replaced the shell in the weapon, and stepped forward to the body.

Stooping, he placed the barrel of the revolver within two inches of the first shot's fatal wound, and pulled the trigger.

The report was not loud, and the object was accomplished. He looked to note the effect of the experiment.

He was satisfied with it.

"Now, he remarked, "to find the weapon with which he did the deed. I wonder if his own revolver is where he always kept it? I will see."

Opening a drawer of the desk, he felt well back into it, and drew out the very thing he desired, a revolver. But here a new difficulty arose. How was he to make it appear that it had been fired?

The old lawyer's revolver was a weapon he had had for years. To give the suicide idea full weight, that must be the weapon found in his hand. And it must appear that it had been recently fired.

Examining it, Browden found that it was loaded full. But it was rusty, and he doubted whether it was capable of being fired.

Taking out the cartridge from one chamber, he tried the lock, and found that it would work.

So far, so good, but how make it appear that it had been used?

Necessity is the mother of invention, 'tis said. It was certainly so in this desperate case. Unloading the cartridge he had taken from the weapon, he replaced the empty shell and snapped the hammer down upon it. That much was done. Then, pouring in the powder, he held the weapon to the lighted gas and touched it off. There was a flash and a "puff!" but no report that could have been heard

outside the office, and the object was accomplished.

"Excellent!" the rescuer exclaimed. "It is bound to work! No one can doubt for a moment but that it was suicide."

He stooped and put the revolver into the lifeless right hand, with the thumb in the trigger-guard.

"There you are, old man," he remarked, heartlessly, "a suicide whether you would or not."

Picking up the papers, he folded them in an orderly manner and returned them to the safe. Having that done, he locked the safe and laid the keys on the desk.

Next, he took the lawyer's key from the door and laid that on the desk, too, and was about to turn out the gas when another thought came to him. Why not forge a brief note over the lawyer's signature, stating that he had taken—or, rather, intended to take—his own life?

The idea seemed to be a good one, and he set about carrying it out. Paper and pencil were handy, and, taking up the pencil, he hastily wrote the words: "By my own hand. Z. H." And in this he imitated the old lawyer's hand closely.

"There, nothing further can be done," he reflected, "so I will get away with all haste. I have been here too long already."

Unlocking the door with the key with which he had admitted himself, he stepped back to the gas to turn it out, but the thought came to him that it would be better to leave it burning, and so he did. Going out, he locked the door after him, and, lighting a match, went softly and carefully along the hall and down the stairs to the front door.

There he paused to listen, and, not hearing anything, he opened the door and passed out to the street.

Having locked the door, he set out at a rapid walk, putting distance between himself and the scene of his crime as speedily as possible. He took a look at his watch, and found it to be half-past three.

He met many persons before he reached home, but none whom he knew. And at last he was safely in his room, without having been seen or heard by one in the house, as he believed.

CHAPTER XIV.

DISCOVERY AND VERDICT.

Almost every building of any size in New York has its janitor. This dingy old building, on this out-of-the-way down-town street was no exception. It had its janitor in the person of one Terrence McDougherty, an aged Irishman, so aged that it might have been readily imagined that he and the old building had been young together.

Terrence was a dry old soul, as honest as the sun, and perfectly contented with his station in life, humble though it was. He had been janitor here as long as the oldest tenant in the building could recollect, and was liked by them all.

Numbered among the older tenants had been Zaccheus Hamman. He and the old janitor had been on particularly good terms. It had been the janitor's custom for a good many years to call at the lawyer's office every morning soon after the hour when it was usually opened.

On these occasions there was always a cordial exchange of "good morning!" and now and then the old janitor would be required to perform some errand for the lawyer, for which he would receive some trifling remuneration.

When the janitor arrived at the building about at his usual time on this morning of the crime he set about the sweeping of halls and stairs.

Shouldering his broom, he went up to the top floor and commenced his work, and, as the sweeping was done daily, it was never very laborious.

When he came down to the hall where Lawyer Hamman's office was situated, he noticed something unusual.

This was that some matches had been

burned in the hall since his last sweeping; but he gave it no more than a passing thought.

Before he had finished his work, the offices in the building were beginning to open.

When he had done, and when the time for Mr. Hamman's office to be open was a little past, he went up to pay his morning respects.

Trying the door, he was surprised to find it still locked, for Mr. Hamman had always been as regular as a clock in arriving at his office promptly on time every morning.

"He must be sick, sure," Terrence mused. "He never has stayed away without puttin' a notice on the dure, unless he was sick. He will be around, Oi've no doubt, or else Oi will hear from him by noon."

He had an errand out, and when he returned he went up to the office once more, but the door was still locked, and there was no sign of life within.

Stooping, he looked in at the keyhole, though it was done with no definite purpose in view. It was upon the moment's impulse.

What was his surprise, though, to find that the gas was burning brightly, a thing that was decidedly unusual in the office of Zaccheus Hamman, and more so at this hour.

His limited view did not admit of his seeing that awful thing that lay on the floor.

"Faith!" he exclaimed, "but Oi don't belave everything is all roight here. Oi must foind out."

Going down to the street, he found a policeman, and told him of the suspicion he had. He could not tell what he imagined could be wrong, but thought something was.

The policeman advised him to send for Mr. Hamman, and so find out whether he was sick, or the reason why he was not at the office; at the same time informing him of the fact that the gas was burning there.

This seemed about the right thing to do, and Terrence was about to act upon the suggestion when a woman made her appearance at the building, making inquiry for the old lawyer.

The janitor had seen her there before once or twice, and recognized her as Mr. Hamman's housekeeper.

"Isn't he at home, sure?" Terrence asked.

"No, he is not at home," the woman said. "He went to bed at his usual hour last night, but this morning when I went to call him he was not there."

"Then something is wrong," the janitor exclaimed. "He has not come here yet this mornin', but dhe gas is a-burnin' in his office. We'll investigate at wanst."

When the office door was forced open the awful discovery was made.

"Hivvins!" cried the janitor, as he drew back, "it has been murther!"

"Or more likely suicide," suggested the officer, who had opened the door. "He has a pistol in his hand, you see."

"No, he never killed himself, Mr. Hamman didn't," the housekeeper disputed. "I have knowed him a good many years, and I know ne allus had a great horror of that."

"Let us see what is written here," observed the officer, and he stepped over the body and picked up the paper on the desk. "Yes, it is just what I thought from the way that pistol is held. Listen to this:

"By my own hand. Z. H."

"But I don't believe it, all the same," the housekeeper still persisted. "He never has done it himself. He allus hated that thing wuss than any other, I believe. I've heard him say he couldn't be tempted to kill himself, no how."

"Well, it will be for the coroner to decide," said the officer. "Will you go and send word to the sergeant to come here at once, Terrence?"

The janitor went immediately, and in

a little time the sergeant and other policemen were on hand.

A careful examination of everything was made, and the decision was that it was a clear case of suicide. It proved itself.

"I don't care what you say," cried the housekeeper, "I don't believe it! I guess I knowed Mr. Hamman better than any of you, and I know he wouldn't do it."

"And who are you?" the sergeant asked.

"My name is Matilda Broadsaw, and I am his housekeeper," was the straight answer.

"Well, theory and sentiment are one thing, but clear proof is quite another," the sergeant commented.

"Shall I send for Mr. Browden?" the janitor here asked.

"Who is he?" inquired the sergeant, quickly.

"He is the old man's nephew, sir," was the answer. "Mr. Hamman has often told me that his nephew would take his place when he died."

"I will send for him myself, if you will tell me where he lives," the sergeant decided. "I suppose he is the right person to take charge of the office when we are done with it."

The address was given, and the sergeant sent one of his men off.

The news quickly spread beyond the old building, and a crowd soon collected around the street doors, where the policemen held the curious ones back. The usual steps were taken in the matter, and the coroner was sent for.

In the meantime the housekeeper had gone sorrowfully home, protesting strongly that it was not a case of suicide, and that she knew.

But, to follow the officer who had been sent to inform Browden.

He had been instructed how to make the announcement to Browden, and to notice how the news affected him.

Not that the sergeant had any suspicion, but having learned that Browden was to succeed the old man in the business, it was well enough to pay attention to these things.

It was half-past ten when the officer reached the house.

Browden had just got up, or at any rate had not been up very long, and had not yet left his room.

When told that a policeman desired to see him, he feigned surprise to a natural degree, and directed that he be shown to his room.

When the officer entered Browden greeted him civilly, and asked:

"Is there not some mistake, officer? Am I the man you want to see?"

"There is no mistake, sir, if your name is Hector Browden," he was assured.

"And that is my name. What is your business with me?"

"Well, sir," said the officer, leisurely, "your uncle has been murdered, and I have been sent to—"

"What!" Browden cried, acting well his part, "my uncle murdered!"

"Yes, sir, and you are wanted."

This almost threw Browden off his balance, but he held on.

"Yes, I will go with you immediately," he said. "When, where, how was it done?" he inquired. "Tell me everything while I make ready. This is something horrible. I can't realize it."

Believing fully that it was a case of suicide, and there being no suspicion against Browden, the officer saw in all this only the natural surprise and excitement of an innocent man, just as such information would be likely to affect any one under like circumstances.

"Well, it may not be murder," he modified. "It looks a good deal more like suicide. He was found dead in his office this morning, with a pistol in his hand. He has been shot, or he shot himself, and I guess there's no doubt but he did it himself."

"In his office, do you say?" Browden asked.

"Yes, in his office."

"Then it has been quite recently done. He never went there before half-past nine."

The policeman went ahead now, and told all he could about the matter. And telling Browden that he was simply wanted at the office to help the coroner and the officers, took his leave.

The moment he was gone Browden's face took on its expression of devilish cunning.

"It has worked to perfection!" he ejaculated. "Now the worst is over, and I can face anything else. Heavens! but I quaked when he said I was wanted."

Browden and the coroner reached the office about the same time, and the business of preparing for an inquest was begun immediately. A jury was called, and at one o'clock in the afternoon the inquest opened.

To give a full report of it would be superfluous. Every point that could be brought out has been given already in one way or another, and to repeat them is not necessary.

Hector Browden stated that the last time he had seen his uncle in life Mr. Hamman had impressed upon his mind that, should he die suddenly, he, Hector, was to assume immediate charge of his affairs.

"But," Browden added, "I had no idea he had such a thought as this in mind."

The old housekeeper stuck to her assertion that it was not suicide, but that, in the face of the evidence, counted for nothing, and the jury returned a verdict of death by his own hand; and so the affair was brought to an end.

CHAPTER XV.

BEGINNING THE STRUGGLE.

The evening that followed the events just recorded old Anthony Burry was sitting by the stove, while his grandchild was clearing up after their evening repast.

Emily was filling the room with the music of her rich young voice.

Suddenly she stopped and exclaimed:

"Say, granddad, I wonder if I ever could learn to sing?"

"Learn to sing! Why, bless your heart, Emily, you can sing now sweeter than any bird."

"Oh, yes, that is what you allus say; but I mean to be a great singer, like this Vasari we hear so much about. You know that old Eytalian monkey says I can, and I suppose he knows, even if he is a villain."

"Don't let me hear mention of his name!" cried the old man. "I am almost sorry that I didn't jab him when he was here, I vow I am. I haven't had any peace of mind since. I am afraid he has turned your head by his sleek way and oily tongue."

The girl laughed merrily.

"Don't you let that trouble you any, granddad," she admonished. "It would take more than him to turn my head. I would like to know how to sing right and proper, if there was any way I could learn. It must be just immense to know how."

"And what is right and proper, I'd like to know," cried the old man, "if it ain't singin' just like you do? You don't know what a treasure you are to me, Emily, and howe homesome it is to hear your sweet voice. The screechin' of that woman on the stage would be like the squeal of a pig compared with it."

The young girl laughed again, at this, and was about to say something more when a step in the hall drew her attention.

"Somebody is comin'," she announced.

"Not that Eytalian!" cried the old man. "If it is—"

"No, no, it ain't him, granddad; it sounds more like Old Weeks."

"Not Gabriel! What can be bringin' him here? It ain't his night."

The door opened and Gabriel Weeks shuffled in.

"What did I tell ye?" demanded Emily.

"Sure enough!" cried the grandfather.

He sprang up as he spoke, and the two old men greeted affectionately, as was their wont.

"You are late for dinner, though, Gabriel," Anthony informed. "We wasn't expectin' ye, you know."

"Of course not, of course not," Gabriel cried, as he greeted Emily. "I had no idee of comin' till I got home. Blessed little spot of wayside rest!" he exclaimed clasping his hands and looking around, "how I do delight to come here."

Old Anthony placed a chair for his friend, and the two were soon seated.

"And what is it that has brought ye here?" Anthony inquired.

Gabriel drew a newspaper from his pocket, slapped his knee with it, and exclaimed:

"This is what brought me here, Ant'ny, this and nothin' else!"

"That newspaper brought ye!"

"It just did, Ant'ny, boy. I know you don't take no evenin' paper, and I couldn't help comin' over to ye with the news. It is bound to interest ye."

Emily had paused in her work, interested.

"I'll tell ye, Ant'ny, right straight off," Gabriel still beat around, "but I want to lead up to it, sort of lead up to it like, you know, to be sure I'm on the right track. You remember the last time I was here?"

"Of course I remember it," Anthony assured. "We had mutton pie, and that 'ere skunk of a Eytalian pushed himself in on us."

"Yes, that was the time; but do you remember what we talked about after the Eytalian had gone?"

"I wish you wouldn't mention that miserable furren scoundrel, Gabriel; it makes me feel oncomfortable."

"He means them riches that you told us about, granddad," put in Emily.

"That's it! that's it exactly!" averred Gabriel. "You remember, don't ye?"

"Yes, I remember about that, but what in the world has the paper got to do with it? Come, Gabriel, come!"

"Yes, I'm comin' to it now. In what you was a-tellin' us, me and Emily here, you said your grandfather was a Howell Clayburn, and you mentioned a cousin that was named Hilltown, didn't ye?"

"Yes, yes! What of it?"

Old Burry was now eager and excited, and Emily was scarcely less so.

"Yes, let's hear it," she urged.

Old Gabriel put on his spectacles and opened the paper, squared himself for the self-imposed task, and read aloud.

The article filled nearly a column of one of the leading evening papers. It was of a case of suicide of an old lawyer, Zaccheus Hamman; that his tragic end brought to the public mind the recollection of the great Clayburn will case, which had been for years in Hamman's hands, but had never been settled.

Then it gave a sketch of Hamman and an extended notice of the Clayburn case, which had been hanging fire for so many years. That almost forgotten something of the dim past was brought out again, and that something was this "matter of millions," as the affair was dubbed. "Where are the Clayburn heirs?" was asked. "Will they now come forward and press their claim?" The whole field was gone over, giving the particulars of the case as they are known to the reader. Hamman's love episode with one of the heirs was recalled. Her name was given. Hector Browden was named as the new head of affairs in the office. The dogged assertion of the old housekeeper that it had not been suicide was mentioned.

When Gabriel came to the end of it,

and looked up proudly to see how his auditors were affected by it, he found Emily in a very attentive attitude, while Anthony was looking down at the floor, resting his head on his hand.

"And that is what brought me here," Gabriel said.

Anthony looked up.

"So," he remarked, "that was the man that had this affair in hand, was it? I never knowed who he was. But, now he's dead, and that settles it."

"Why does it settle it?" cried Emily. "The fortune is still there, and accordin' to what the paper says it is a mighty big one. I tell you what it is, granddad, if you don't make a try for it, I will, and that's all."

"And she is right, too," supported Gabriel. "Now that the thing has come to light, Ant'ny, boy, and you know where to apply, why not make a try for it? I would, that I can tell you. Why, you might get an immense fortune out of it. Who can tell. Go for it, by all means!"

Old Anthony smiled.

"It is all well enough to talk about and to dream over," he said, "but when it comes right down to cold business I might go to this office and say I'm a grandson of old Howell Clayburn, and I want a share of his money. Then they would ask me for my proof, and there I'd be. What could I do to prove my identity? No one would take my bare word for 't, and I ain't got even a scrap of paper to offer to 'rd establishin' my claim."

"And that's just what I'd make a try for," asserted Emily. "If you are the grandson of Clayburn, then somebody somewhere can prove it, and I'll bet a smart lawyer could hunt it up for you. And many a one would be only too glad to try it, you bet."

"Well, that's so; but would it pay? That is the question. Wouldn't it be more worry and fret and trouble than the little we'd get out of it would ever pay for? I believe it would."

"Then let the lawyer stand all that part of it," cried Emily. "He'd be willin' to do it fast enough. Nothin' ventured nothin' had."

The matter was talked over at great length, and in this humble way was begun the struggle of right against wrong for the possession of the great prize. But what could these poor heirs do against such a man as Hector Browden?

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FIRST MOVE A FAILURE.

There was the funeral of Mr. Hamman, very orderly, but not largely attended.

He had outlived his day, so to say, and having been something of a recluse, had not a very large circle of friends.

Hector Browden had assumed formal charge of his affairs, and about the first thing he did, after the funeral was over, was to take another office and give up the old one.

There were too many horrors connected with the old place to suit him. He was not steel-nerved, and a little experience in the dismal old den was sufficient. The new office was on a more lively street, and in a light, cheerful building.

Out of respect for what people would say, Browden and his distant cousin, Rowena Hymilton, withdrew from the social swim for the time.

"Prince" Monte Cristo was still the lion, and "Queen" Vasari the rage.

And yet these two had not met, socially. The newspapers were doing their best to bring the event about. The "Daily Earth" was putting forth every effort in this direction, and had even gone so far as to hint that Monte Cristo could not be so very badly smitten, after all, to allow a dashing young American to step in and

oust him, as Laurence Weldron seemed to have done.

And then on top of that was another paragraph, in another paper, to the effect that perhaps the "Prince" had found a superior attraction in one of America's fair daughters. At any rate such might be assumed to be the case, from his growing intimacy with the handsome, gifted, and accomplished Dianthe Marxham. And there was some foundation for this supposition.

So far, there was no explanation of the shot that had been fired at Signorina Vasari. The mysterious man had not been seen again, and the "Queen" had not been further molested.

Detective Sharpe was still to the fore, and had made himself the right-hand man of Browden, as he had been of Hamman.

Reporter Dentway, too, was in the van, but had not yet discovered what Sharpe had meant by telling him to make a note of it—"That Sharpe says it beats the devil."

Somehow—and there were two persons who could not tell just how—Lewellyn Dalorme and Josephine Blarcome had come to be passingly intimate with Rowena Hymilton and Hector Browden, respectively. And the mentioned two who could not tell just how it had come about were Dalorme and Miss Blarcome.

Lewellyn and Miss Blarcome had not been thrown together, in fact were but slightly acquainted, but, though they knew it not, their situations were similar. The enemy had a hold upon them both.

One other person remains to be mentioned—Signor Vanzini, the Italian. He had by no means given up his intentions toward Emily Woolruff.

He was to be seen on the street in front of the house occasionally, looking up at the windows to catch sight of the child, or waiting to hear her sing. He was determined in his purpose respecting her.

Hector Browden was seated in his office one forenoon, and was studying some papers relating to the Clayburn matter, when an old man entered.

He was a stranger to Browden. His shoulders were bent, his hair was white, and his aged face was full of wrinkles, yet had withal a pleasing expression and kindly smile.

"You are Mr. Browden?" he interrogated, taking off his hat.

"That is my name, sir," Hector answered. "Can I do anything for you, sir?"

"As to that I don't know," was the slow answer, "but I have called to see you on a matter of business."

"Very well, sir; shall be glad to serve you in any way I can. Please help yourself to a chair. May I inquire your name?"

"My name is Anthony Burry, sir."

He it was, the old "knifeman" of Broadway.

At the mention of the name Browden started slightly, and with a movement of his arm drew a convenient newspaper over the papers he had been examining.

"Anthony Burry, you say?" he repeated. "I believe I have never heard the name before. But, no matter, let me hear what your business is."

The old man settled himself in a chair, and facing Browden, proceeded to make known the errand that had brought him there.

"I understand," he commenced, "that you are the successor to Mr. Hamman in the matter of the old Clayburn will case."

"Ah! that is your business, eh?" exclaimed Browden, and he leaned forward, as though full of interest.

"Yes, my business is in regard to that," Anthony assured.

"Well, in answer to your question,

yes. That matter is now in my hands, and nothing would please me so well as to see it settled. Are you one of the heirs of Howell Clayburn?"

"I am a grandson of his," old Anthony replied.

"Ha! is it possible?" cried Browden, as though much pleased. "I am more than delighted to see you, I assure you. But, and here is the rub, can you prove that you are what you claim?"

"No, I cannot," the old man admitted, reluctantly.

"It is as I feared, then. I am afraid that it will be useless for you to try to establish your claim, Mr. Burry. I do not doubt for a moment that you are what you claim to be, but you know the law must have proof."

"Yes, I know that, and that is what I want to begin to hunt up. I thought perhaps if there was anything comin' to me that would make it worth while, that you would take hold of the affair for me and try to 'stablish my claim, for a share of the money I might get."

"Oh! that was your idea, eh?"

"Yes, sir, that's it."

"Well, Mr. Burry, how much do you imagine this would bring you, if you could prove your identity?"

"I don't know, sir. I don't know anything about it, any further'n what the papers says. They set it down as a matter of millions."

"And how much would you be willing to allow me, in case I could do this? I do not want to hold out any hopes to you that I can do it, though, for I do not think I could."

"Well, I would be willin' to give you quarter, anyhow," the old man declared. "quarter out f fifty thousand dollars, or even less'n that, would leave me a nice sum."

"So it would, so it would. But, here is something else for you to think about: Once you had established the line to the original Clayburn, it would be open to all, and I have no doubt but that there would be five hundred of them at least. The whole thing might dwindle down to nothing, or next to nothing, for each."

"Yes, that is so. I have thought that all over. But my little grandchild insisted that I should come here and see you, and she says that if you won't take hold of it for us, and if I won't take it up for her, then she'll go into it herself and see what she kin do with it. And she means business, Emily does, as I kin assure you, sir; and when she means business, sir, somethin' is goin' to be done."

"Well, well, I admire her for it, but I think it almost useless. And you had better tell her that I think so, too, and that it is my honest opinion. No doubt she has a greater fortune in her voice once it could be trained and—"

But there Hector Browden came to an abrupt halt. He could have kicked himself with a good will. He had put his foot into it badly.

"Do you know about my Emily, then?" the old man asked, in surprise. "You must know somethin' about her."

To hesitate was to be lost, as Browden knew, and he acted instantly upon a thought that flashed into his mind. He must rectify the blunder he had so unwittingly allowed himself to make.

"I know nothing about her, sir," he denied, "further than what you just told me. You said she could sing like a bird, and that somebody had praised her voice very highly."

"I said that?" the old man exclaimed, amazed.

"Why, of course, you did," responded Browden, laughing. "Has it so soon slipped your mind?"

"I am an old man, I know," said Mr. Burry, slowly, "but I have not quite lost my wits, and I could swear on a stack of Bibles that I never said that."

Browden smiled now, and waved his hand as if to dismiss the whole matter, saying:

"My dear good man," patronizingly, "you certainly did say it, though as a mere passing remark. Why, I never saw you nor heard of you before in my life, and how could I know anything about you, or your grandchild, either?"

"Well, I must have said it, I suppose, but if I did it is the strangest thing that ever happened to me that I can't remember sayin' it."

"Oh, it is nothing; any one is liable to make the same sort of absent-minded remarks. But, about this other matter, I do not think there would be the least bit of use in your trying to establish your claim. My honest opinion is, sir, that that old man's money will never be turned over to the heirs."

"Then you won't try to make good my claim, on them 'ere conditions, eh?" remarked the old knife-man, as he rose to go.

"No, I couldn't attempt it," was the answer. "I wouldn't know where to begin, and I am afraid there would be no ending to it. My uncle spent his life trying to straighten it out, and if he couldn't do it, there is no use of any one else trying."

"Well, then, I must go back and tell Emily what you say. She'll be sorter disapp'inted, I know, though I ain't any so myself; but I hope it will discourage her from tryin' any further. I'll bid you good-day, sir, and sorry I have troubled you with it. As you say, I reckon it's no use lookin' for it."

"Good-day, Mr. Burry," Browden responded. "If you should find any proof, I shall only be too happy then to help you, but until you do I cannot undertake anything in the matter further than I am required."

The old knife-man made his way slowly to the street, while Browden paced the floor, troubled.

Burry had not been gone long when the door opened again, and this time a thin, wiry-looking, hawk-faced man entered; even Isaac Sharpe, detective.

CHAPTER XVII.

VILLAINOUS COMPACT.

"Isaac Sharpe!" exclaimed Browden. "At your service, noble patron," the detective answered, and he dropped into a chair.

"And what brings you here?" inquired Browden.

"I followed the trail," explained Sharpe. "Let me know right away if you want me to follow it further."

"Ha! I see!" Browden exclaimed. "You followed old Burry here. No, you need not pay any attention to him. Not just now. I see you have your eyes open."

The detective settled back in his chair.

"I flatter myself that there is not much going on that I do not know," he remarked. "When I took a look at the old knife-man's corner this morning to see whether he was on hand as usual, I found him dressed in his best. More than that, his grandchild was with him. Ha! said I, to myself, what meaneth this? I must know. So, accordingly, I stopped and watched. The old man was going somewhere, and the girl was to keep the stand for him till his return. And it was Isaac Sharpe's business to learn where he went and what he went for."

"Exactly so. Sharpe, you're the devil."

"Just so. He posted the girl in the knife business, and then he set out, and I after him. He led me right here. That is the whole of it. But, what's the trouble? You looked a little off when I first came in. Did the old fellow disturb your peace of mind? Did he bring up the Clayburn matter?"

"Yes, he did; and, now that you are

here, I want to talk to you about that very thing. How much do you know about that affair?"

The detective smiled.

"Well," he answered, "I know as much about it as old Hamman did, and maybe a little more. I want to talk with you, too. This is the first fair chance I have had since you came into power."

"Very well; we will get right down to it, then. Just tell me what you do know about this affair, to begin with."

"It is soon told. I know that your respected uncle had a big fortune in his keeping for the Clayburn heirs. I know that he was holding on to it like grim death, waiting for the heirs to die. I know that he had a scheme in mind for you and Rowena Hymilton to marry two of the heirs, and so come in for a share of the riches. And I know a good deal more, in odds and ends."

"I thought so," Browden commented. "I thought it would be queer if you, a professional detective, could be in my uncle's employ for years without sticking your nose into his business further than you were paid for doing. Now, let me ask you a question, right to the point. How would you like to make a quarter of a million of clean, hard cash?"

The detective winked knowingly, and laid his finger on the side of his nose.

"Half a million or nothing," he made answer.

"What do you mean?" demanded Browden, surprised.

"Just what I say. Nothing short of half a million. That's my price."

"Your price for what? Make yourself plain. Don't talk in riddles."

"Well, it is easy to do that. I hold the key to this situation. You can prove the identity of these five heirs if you want to; so can I. That is the whole thing in a nutshell."

"And you mean to say by that that unless I promise you half a million, you will take sides with these heirs and help them to get their rights?"

"You can see for yourself how easy it would be for me to do so. I know what your game is, noble patron; it is to gobble the whole thing. No use for you to deny that."

"But, I do deny it! My intentions are perfectly honorable. I defy you to prove them otherwise. If you have got this information, I want it, in the interest of the heirs. It is more than I possess."

The detective laughed heartily.

"Don't take me for a fool, please don't," he requested facetiously. "Why, it was from Hamman's papers that I got what I know, and you have got the same information from the same source. I see I shall have to turn the screw just a little harder. Tell me, Hector Browden, who killed your uncle?"

Browden half sprung up; for he had taken a seat; his face paled and he was for a second a very picture of guilt.

"W-what do you mean?" he demanded, trying hard to recover his nerve.

"Wasn't my question plain enough?"

"Your question was plain," retorted Browden, "but not your meaning. I believe that my uncle killed himself. If you have any knowledge to the contrary, you must make it known."

"That's right," smiled Sharpe, "that's right; a little more practice will put you on your feet. You might fool a good man men, Browden, but you can't fool Isaac Sharpe; no use your trying. I know who killed Hamman; and his old housekeeper was not to be fooled, either."

Browden felt the perspiration beginning to dampen his forehead, and his heart was quaking, yet still he tried to hold up.

"If you know what you assert," he said, "you know more than any one else. I demand that you make it known to the authorities, and that immediately."

"Not so fast, noble patron, not so fast! Let me give you just a few tips before

you go off. I was late getting to the office, after the crime, but I got there just the same. That weapon the old man had in his hand was not the one with which he was killed. No bullet passed through the barrel of it! It was smoked all right, but the inside of the barrel was scaled with rust. Then, there was loose powder on the office floor in front of the desk. More than that, when you held the weapon to the gas to flash the powder and smoke it, you didn't hold it far enough from the wall. There was left just the indication of smoke there. You—"

"Stop right there!" Browden ordered. "What do you mean by using my name in connection with your insinuations? Do you mean to say that I killed Zacheus Hamman? If you do, you had better have a care what you are saying. You may be given a chance to prove what you assert."

"I see I shall have to give the screw just one more little turn," observed Sharpe, with aggravating coolness. "In my own mind, said I to myself, if this was murder, I can think of but one person to lay it to. That person is Hector Browden. I nosed around the office, with the results I have told you of. That put me right on my mettle. I nosed around all the more. Away back under the desk I discovered a button. I recognized it as the same sort I had seen on your overcoat two winters ago. Believe that I began to work in earnest then. A visit to your room—"

"Heavens!" Browden gasped, "you have not been to my room!"

"Oh, yes, I have been there," was the cool assurance. "I found your coat, and it was minus a button. I found your pistol. Two chambers were empty. In your coat pocket I found two loose bullets. One from your pistol, the other from the one you left in your uncle's grasp. Oh, it was a clever scheme, noble patron, and it fooled the police nicely, but it couldn't fool me."

Hector Browden sat as though paralyzed. His face was like death, and perspiration stood out upon his forehead.

"I don't ask you to confess it," Sharpe added, "but I have these bits of evidence in my possession, and you can see how it stands. Now, as I said before, it is half a million or nothing."

Browden fully realized his situation, but yet he would not give it up.

Was it not just possible that Sharpe was bluffing him? That he was lying?

"You are enough to scare a fellow out of a year's growth, Sharpe," he said, with a dismal effort at a smile. "Of course you are joking. You do not mean what you have charged," the guilty man urged.

"You will find that I do, unless we can come to terms here and now."

"This is blackmail! I defy you to do your worst! I dare you to go ahead and make that charge against me!"

It was the last desperate act toward resistance.

"All right; have it your way, then, Browden. I am willing to keep what I know, for half a million. Or, make it a clean million, and I'll go in with you and we will make it our mutual game."

The detective had leaned forward and spoke in his most confidential manner.

"Do you mean that?" Browden asked.

"I do; I swear it."

"Then it's a bargain. Give me your hand on it."

The hand of rascal met that of rogue, and the bargain was sealed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT MONTE CRISTO'S BALL.

Gotham was in a furor indeed.

"Prince" Monte Cristo's grand reception was at hand. It was to be about the grandest affair of the kind, as an individual doing, that New York had ever seen.

One night of the Vasari opera had been bought outright, at an enormous cost, and the reception was to be in the opera house.

The floor had been cleared, and dancing would be a feature.

It would certainly be the event of the season. And there was to be an immense supper in the — Hall, under the supervision of the most noted chef in the city.

Admission could not be bought at any price. The engraved cards of invitation issued by the "Prince" were the only "open sesame" that would be recognized. But these were out by the hundreds, and care had been taken to slight no one.

Under pressure from the newspapers, the "Prince" had given out a few cards for the admission of reporters, but these were so distinct from the others that the poor reporter must feel that he was as a goat among lambs, and there only on sufferance.

Best of all, as the point was considered, it was to be a masquerade. And as one famous leader of society predicted, it would be "the ball of a thousand." Nothing approaching it had ever before been attempted by one person. New York had been turned inside out for two weeks, by the very elite, in quest of costumes, every belle trying to outdo all the rest in points of cost and splendor.

The evening was at last at hand.

The hour for opening the opera-house was nine o'clock.

By directions of Monte Cristo, only selections from the opera would be rendered by Vasari.

It was his opera for the night, as has been said, and his word was law. Then, this was as it should be, too.

The evening was dedicated to the reception and ball, and the full opera would have been a dead letter. It must be only an incident to the whole.

At the hour for the opening, the street was lined with carriages on both sides for a long distance. The doors opened, the carriages moved up at snail pace, and one by one deposited their occupants.

The men were clean shaven and heavily coated, while the women were enveloped in costly cloaks and shawls, mostly bareheaded, or wearing only light coverings, with here and there the flash of a bare arm and the glint of jewels.

The ordeal of the cloak room over, the men and women sought each other, now in all the hideousness or gorgeousness of disguise, with faces masked.

If there was anything out of the usual about the affair, it was due to the "Prince." Precedent was nothing to him, custom and usage were burdensome, and to follow the beaten paths was not to be original.

And whatever the "Prince" did or directed was law. He was the czar of the occasion, before whom even the divine Vasari must pale.

The lobbies of the house were a wonderland of flowers. The doorways were triumphal arches. Beyond was the great auditorium, now including the stage, at the rear of which were boxes, the central one being that of the "Prince."

But, description must cease. Those who have witnessed similar arrangements for Gotham's big balls, can readily picture the scene; all who have not must draw upon the imagination.

Within an hour that vast space was so crowded that, large as it was, it looked small. There was a first crush at the doors, and finally in the ball-room itself. Nothing like it had ever been known to that time.

It was a little after ten when Monte Cristo was seen in his box.

Like his guests of the hour, he was in disguise, but his costume had been an open secret.

Immediately following his appearance there, the orchestra struck up, with a prelude.

Soon after, Signorina Vasari appeared, and a selection of opera was rendered in

her best manner. Her voice charmed the vast assemblage into almost perfect silence.

At the close of the second selection, while the house was resounding with the encore, the "Prince" stepped down from his box and approached the renowned prima donna, making her a present of handsome diamonds.

At this the wave of acclamation redoubled, and it grew still louder when the "Prince" gave the prima donna his arm and escorted her from the stage.

This ended the opera, and the orchestra struck up the overture that signaled the opening of the ball.

Suddenly it was discovered that Monte Cristo was missing from his box.

When, where, or how he had gone, no one could tell.

The next that was seen of him was when, after something like ten minutes, he appeared as leader of the grand march, with a lady upon his arm.

His partner wore a costume that was second to none in the room, and, in spite of all disguise, she was immediately declared to be none other than the great prima donna.

The "Prince" was attired in armor as a knight of ye olden time, having now donned a helmet with visor and plume. The "Queen" appeared as a Venetian lady of a past age. And these two made the most striking couple in all that vast crowd.

At last the long-looked-for event had come to pass; namely, the meeting of these two great personages. The reporters, in their corner by themselves, to which they had been relegated immediately upon their arrival, were made happy.

But, there were two in the assembly, not reporters, who were anything but happy, for the time. These were Laurence Weldron and Dianthe Marxham.

Somehow, they found themselves partners for the march, and both were in no delightful mood.

Neither knew the other, just then, of course, but that made no difference to the feelings and disappointments of each.

Finally, the march ended, and was followed by a quadrille, in which the "lion of the elite" and the peerless Vasari took part, and after that they separated.

And, strange to say, and yet not very strange, either, the next dance, a polka, found the "Prince" and Miss Marxham together, while the "Queen" and young Weldron made another couple.

Among the "goats"—the reporters, in their corner, was Henry Dentway. His pencil was flashing over paper at an astonishing speed, as notes in shorthand dropped from its point.

The "Daily Earth," he was determined, should not be distanced by any of its rivals, and, having made all the descriptive memoranda he wanted, he was jotting down a fictitious conversation between the two meteors of the season.

He had just finished, and was looking idly on, when a hand fell upon his arm. Looking around, he found a thin, wiry-looking, hawk-faced man at his side, smiling and easy.

"Sharpe!" the young reporter exclaimed.

"As you see," from the detective.

"And how the dickens did you get here?" Dentway asked.

For answer, the rascal displayed notebook and pencil and a card of admission.

"You see, I'm a reporter for the time being," he said, smiling.

"Well, you lap the mile, you do," the reporter commented. "Is there anything you wouldn't attempt, Sharpe?"

"Oh, yes, a good many things, I suppose. But this was a mere nothing, as you must know."

"What brings you here? Anything new or strange?"

"Oh, no; only came to look on. But, say, is it a fact that the Prince and the Queen have met at last?"

"Yes, that event has happened. Take a look at my column to-morrow."

"I'll do it. But, say! point them out to me, will you? I only just got here."

Dentway complied, and the detective made use of his eyes, and when he had satisfied himself in that direction, he turned again to the young reporter.

"You remember what I told you once before, don't you?" he inquired.

"The thing you told me to make a note of?"

"Exactly. You can jab your pencil there again. Just underscore the note. Sharpe still says it beats the devil!"

"See here! I would like to know what you mean by that?" demanded Dentway. "I begin to think you don't know what you do mean. What are you driving at, anyhow?"

"Right you are, my boy," agreed the detective, "I don't know what I mean. I am all in the dark, and that is why I say it beats the devil. When you hit upon it, you will agree with me. In the mean time, just stick a pin here—Sharpe says it beats the devil!"

The programme was about half done, and supper was in order, when, of a sudden, something startling happened.

A pistol-shot was heard, followed by a woman's scream, and excitement immediately prevailed.

In an instant the reporters had broken from their corner, like the refractory "goats" they were, to learn more by getting into the center of the throng. That is, all but Dentway.

Sharpe laid his hand on his arm and detained him.

"You will get more right here, my boy," he said. "See where the smoke is over there? Man just disappeared through that door. They won't catch him now."

Detective-like, Sharpe had looked to the direction the shot had come from, while the reporter was looking to its effect.

"Yes, he will no-doubt get away," he agreed, with just a turn of his head as Sharpe spoke. "The victim is Signorina Vasari. Wonder if she is killed? See! that fellow is holding her in his arms."

So it was. The shot had hit Vasari, and she was held in the arms of young Weldron.

He was trying to remove her mask, but in vain, for it was, he found, secured by slender steel bands!

The crowd was pressing around him, and he was calling out to the people to give him more room, when the flashing helmet and streaming plume of Monte Cristo was seen moving toward the spot.

He pushed his way, not gently, and was soon at the side of Weldron, when, without any ceremony, he took the signorina from his arms into his own, lifting her with apparent ease, and moved toward the door, calling upon his guests to make way for him.

CHAPTER XIX.

SHARPE DISCLOSES SOMETHING.

The excitement was tremendous.

At first it looked impossible for the "Prince" to get through. His call, however, soon brought his ushers, and the way was speedily cleared for him.

What one and all wanted to learn was, how badly the signorina was hurt. And that question was called out from every side.

"She is not dangerously wounded," responded Monte Cristo, coolly. "The bullet has only cut her arm, as you can see. She has fainted. I will take her home."

He pushed on with his burden, and stopping only to say a few words to one of his men, went out. Laurence Weldron was right behind him, ready to lend assistance.

Reaching the street, the nearest carriage at hand was pressed into service, and as soon as the insensible woman had been placed within, Monte Cristo closed the door almost in young Weldron's face, and the carriage whirled rapidly away.

Weldron was boiling over. His dignity had been hurt a good deal. This duty had been fairly jerked out of his hands. What was Monte Cristo to Vasari?

A little reflection, however, showed him that the singer was at least the guest of the "Prince" for the time, and that his action might be in a measure overlooked on that ground.

As soon as the carriage had gone, the man to whom Monte Cristo had spoken entered the auditorium, advanced to the stage, and called the assembled company to attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he spoke, "the Prince directs me to say to you that he will soon be with you again. Signorina Vasari is not dangerously injured, and as soon as he has taken her home and summoned medical aid he will return, when all will be requested to accompany him to the — Hall."

It was brief, but to the point, and none could misunderstand.

As rascally Detective Sharpe had hinted, young Dentway had been able to get a better understanding of everything than the other reporters who had made a rush for the floor, for they had got themselves into the crowd, while he had been able to look on and jot down his notes easily.

"You didn't catch the fellow's face, did you?" he asked of Sharpe.

"He was masked, like the rest."

"It is plain enough that somebody wants Vasari's life."

"Yes, and that Somebody is going to have it, if she don't look out. This is the second attempt that has been made."

"Do you think it will scare her off the stage?"

"Oh, no, not if she is the woman I take her to be. There will be more of a detective force on hand, though, rest assured of that."

"Why, has there been a force of that kind there?"

"Yes, certainly. There are half a dozen detectives at the opera every night. Didn't you know that?"

"No, it's news to me. I'll make a pointer of that to-morrow. Breathe it not to the others."

"And still you won't disclose anything of this matter at which you are hinting, eh? I begin to see that it concerns Monte Cristo and the signorina. There is something between them more than appears on the surface."

"Ha! you are coming at it, my boy. Keep your eyes open. If you don't agree with me before the winter snows blow, then I give you leave to kick me, that's all. I tell you it does beat— But, no need to repeat it. Just paste it in your hat."

Just here they were interrupted by the man speaking from the stage, as quoted, and Dentway jotted down his words.

"I would like to know what the singer is to the Prince," remarked the reporter, when his pencil stopped.

"And I tell you it beats the devil!" Sharpe immediately. "You are on put in the right tack at last, my boy, and I don't mind talking with you now. The two are no more to each other than the signorina and myself. But then, too, apparently, they are a good deal to each other."

"What is your private surmise in regard to it?"

"See here, do you mean to try to pump me, as a reporter? or are you talking to me as simply man to man?"

"Well, we'll call it the latter, if it suits you better."

"Good enough. On those conditions I'll talk with you about it. You want to understand that Isaac Sharpe is not to be mentioned now, nor at any other time, in your paper."

"Of course not. What I have to say will be on my own responsibility, every time. All I want is to get at just what you suspect, so that I can go into the thing with both eyes open."

"Well, fire ahead."

"Tell me just what you mean by saying it beats the— His Majesty, you know."

"Exactly. I say it beats the devil what is the mystery between this Prince Monte Cristo and Signorina Vasari. That there is something between them is plain. I have thought maybe they are man and wife, and are playing a sharp game. But, the evidence don't prove it."

"He showed enough interest in her just now to support that idea."

"Just so. But, I have played the shadow on them both, and it is as clear as day that they are never in each other's company."

"Well, I am incline to agree with you, Sharpe, that it does beat the deuce," Dentway commented.

And so their conversation ran, as they recalled the times the "Prince" and the "Queen" had been seen together, which could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Meantime, the dancing was going on as merrily as though nothing had happened, and the time passed quickly till the return of the "Prince" was looked for momentarily.

Finally he came.

Word was speedily spread that the signorina's wound had proven to be only a slight one, and that she was in no danger.

Then came the unmasking, with much amusement attending, and the immense number of guests set forth to partake of the eagerly anticipated midnight dinner.

When the — Hall was reached, it was found that it had been transformed into a banqueting hall beyond a gourmand's wildest dreams. It was a dream, indeed, cool, bright, and refreshing, after the ball-room.

The tables, white and flashing, looked to be almost endless. They were not straight, but set to give most room and best effect, and their decorations would have caused a king of old, whose god was his stomach, to turn green with envy.

The "Prince" led Miss Marxham to share his post of honor. His place, by the way, was so arranged, as regards position, that he faced his guests, as nearly as possible.

But, why dwell at length upon the affair? It proved to be the grandest event of the season, and was voted a big social success.

The "Prince" made a speech, of course, which was not outdone by the best of the others. If he had been the "lion" before, he was more than ever lionized now.

Champagne flowed; toast followed toast; all was joy; the repast was marred by nothing of a disagreeable nature. After the feast, a return to the ball-room; and daybreak found some of the merry maskers still on the floor.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ENEMY MOVES.

Next day the papers gave a glowing account of everything.

Vasari wounded! The town went wild over the report, as can be imagined.

Who could the would-be assassin have been? A hint, on the other occasion, that it might have been Monte Cristo, was given the lie now.

Why was her life sought?

Four of the leading morning papers, too, that same morning, had a card in display offering one thousand dollars reward for the detection and arrest of the man who had fired the shot, and signed by the signorina personally.

Considering the hour in which she was wounded, she must have sent the card to the papers immediately upon reaching home, as it was generally inferred.

But there were two who considered it the work of the "Prince." They were Henry Dentway and the rascally Sharpe.

At as early an hour as they deemed at all proper, the reporters descended

upon the signorina's residence, and among them was Dentway.

They were graciously received, in turn, and politely entertained for a few minutes each.

When Dentway was ushered in, he found the "Queen" reclining on a sofa.

"You are a reporter, too?" she languidly inquired.

"Yes," Dentway acknowledged.

"Please be seated, sir."

"I represent the 'Daily Earth,'" the reporter explained, as he sat down. "I am here to inquire how you are this morning."

"Oh, I am all right," was the answer, "except a little weak, and that is more owing to the excitement than to the wound, I assure you. I shall soon be myself again, I think."

"Of course you will appear to-night."

The prima donna smiled.

"Do you imagine I would allow a little thing like this to hinder me from keeping my engagement?" she demanded.

"Why, yes, certainly."

"Indeed, no!" she exclaimed. "I shall appear, I assure you."

"Well, you are heroic, truly. But, tell me, if you will, have you no suspicion who your enemy is?"

"Not the least, I assure you, sir."

"Had you no enemy who may have followed you here?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir. It is a mystery to me, a great mystery."

"I presume you are taking steps toward finding the wretch out, are you not?"

"Yes, I have several detectives looking out for him, but I doubt whether he will ever be caught."

"Have you anything you desire to have expressed in print?"

"Nothing further than I have said already, sir."

"Very well. Our evening edition will assure the public that there is no disappointment in store for them."

"You may give the public that assurance without hesitation. Now, is there anything further you would like to ask, sir?"

"Nothing further, madam, unless— Yes, I will mention it. It is rumored that you and Prince Monte Cristo are—I only repeat gossip, you understand—that you are engaged."

The signorina laughed.

"Such a report is without foundation," she declared. "I hope you will not let so ridiculous a story go into print. The gentleman and myself are nothing to each other, further than is open to every eye. It is not true."

"Then I am authorized to deny it, if it should find its way into the papers?"

"Yes, you have full leave to do so, sir, if it should appear in print; but not otherwise."

Dentway soon took his departure, much mystified. By that ruse he had hoped to bring forth, if not an acknowledgement, at least something upon which to build.

If he was hitting the truth, he believed the signorina would betray it in some way, either in words or actions, somehow; but she had not done so. She had laughed over the idea in the most natural manner, declaring there was nothing in it. And that was all he had gained.

True to her word, the prima donna was not absent from the opera. She appeared to be herself, and her singing was without a flaw, as ever.

The only indication of her recent narrow escape was a band of cloth sewed around her arm near the shoulder.

Some days passed, without important incident.

One warm afternoon, warm for the season, the streets were thronged. The fashionable and select streets and avenues up-town were filled with the elite and their apers.

Those more humble thoroughfares

further down, where poverty reigns, were filled with playing children and gossiping women.

It is to one of the latter, to one that borders upon the Italian quarter, that our attention is called; the one upon which lived old Anthony Burry and his grandchild.

The two prettily-curtained windows in the old tenement "barracks" were wide open, inviting the sunlight and air, and the trilling notes of a merry voice were borne out upon the gentle breeze.

On the opposite side of the street, looking up at these windows, was the Italian, Signor Vanzini.

He was well dressed, in his usual suit of fine black, and was rubbing his hands together in his admiration of the voice.

"Ah! but she-a haf ze voice much-a incomparable! She sing-a like a bird. I lofe her—I lofe her voice! Ah! eet ees all-a right! Soon she's'll be a-mine, and-a then I will make her ze prima donna grand-a! Ah! eet will be ze triumph of my life. I lofe her, I lofe her!"

With that climax he clasped his hands, and just at that moment Emily Woolruff stepped to the window and looked out.

Immediately the Italian doffed his hat and bowed elaborately, following it up with blowing kisses to her.

Emily "made a face" at him, as usual, and then laughed merrily at his ludicrous antics.

"Eet ees an honor that-a I bow to you, beautiful signorina," the Italian exclaimed. "Eet ees with-a no shame, but with-a much-a pride!"

Many were watching him, but he seemed oblivious to that. And now his words drew the attention of many more, and all joined in a laugh at him. But he was deaf and blind to it all.

"What is it?" called out the fun-loving girl. "Has it got a name? It must have got away, I guess; lost, strayed or stolen."

This brought forth a louder outburst of laughter than the Italian could stand, evidently, for he flushed and turned away, and soon disappeared from the scene around the corner.

As he passed out of sight, the girl threw a kiss after him in a comical way, laughing as she did so, and turned back into the room.

Soon her voice was heard in song again, as though she were doing it to worry the Italian as much as possible.

Signor Vanzini went on, muttering to himself, trying to fix upon some plan to capture his treasure.

"I will-a have her," he vowed to himself. "I will-a have her, as I live! She s'll be-a mine."

He had not proceeded a great distance when a hand fell upon his shoulder.

With a start that was almost a jump, he stopped and faced around to see himself confronted by a thin, wiry-looking, hawk-faced man in black, who smiled good-naturedly as their eyes met.

We need not mention the name of this personage.

"You-a want-a see me?" the Italian interrogated.

"Such is my desire, Signor Vanzini,"

"Ha! you-a know my name?"

"Yes, certainly, you are well known to me, by sight."

"And-a who are you? I believe I haf not ze honare to-a know—"

"Oh, that's all right," was the easy assurance. "I'll make myself acquainted shortly. But say, I want to have a private talk with you. I happen to know that you would like to get possession of old Burry's girl, without running counter to the police, and I think I can help you in that little game."

CHAPTER XXI.

EMILY WOOLRUFF'S DANGER.

Signor Vanzini was both surprised and alarmed. How came this stranger to know so much of his private business?

"V'at-a do you mean-a?" he demanded. "I know not-a v'at you talk about. Eet ees to me incomprehensible."

"I know better than that," disputed Sharpe. "I know that you want to get hold of that girl and marry her, and train her voice. You needn't deny it."

"Eet ees mystery to me that-a I do not understand," the Italian still beat about. "You must-a be mistaken in ze man. I am not ze man that-a you take me to be. You hafe mistaken-a me."

"No, sir; no mistake about it," persisted Sharpe. "I take you to be Signor Vanzini, as I said. I know you well enough. And you want to get that girl into your hands. Why, I heard you say so only a few minutes ago. Now, I am just the man who can help you, if you will pay me for it."

"Shh!" the Italian cautioned; "do not-a talk so loud. Come with-a me, and I will-a hear v'at you hafe to say to me."

"I thought you would."

The Italian led the way, and no more was said till they were seated in a not highly respectable saloon, kept by Italians, and Vanzini seemed to be quite at home there. He led the way to a reserved table, giving an order at once.

Sharpe sat down with him, and in a moment wine was set before them.

"Now," the Italian said, "you may-a talk."

"Well, what do you think of what I have said?" asked the intriguer.

"I must-a ask who you are, before I tell-a you too much," was the guarded response.

"My name is Gillam, then, if you must know," the rascal informed. "I am a sport about town."

"And-a why you help-a me to carry off the pretty signorina, if that-a was what I should-a desire? That-a would be bad-a work."

"Yes, I know it would, but it would be as easy as rolling off a log. I hate old Burry, and if I could help you to get possession of the girl I would gladly do it. See?"

"Yes, yes; I see-a v'at you-a mean. But how do I know-a I could trust you, if that-a was v'at I should-a desire? Maybe you would fool-a me, and I would-a not get ze pretty signorina after all. And maybe you would-a ask too much moneys."

"No, I won't fool you, that I swear," Sharpe vowed. "And as to wanting too much money, I'll help you for twenty dollars."

"Twenty dollars! I would-a give you feefty, if you help-a me—that-a ees, if that-a was v'at I should-a desire; I hafe not said so."

"Oh, drop that!" cried Sharpe. "I know your little game."

"But-a, could I trust you?"

"You will have to, old fellow, that's all."

"I hafe to trust-a you! I do not-a comprehendible you, Mistare Gillam."

"Well, then, I'll try and talk so that you can comprehendible me," the detective said, smiling. "You have got to let me help you, or I'll put the police on your track."

The Italian looked more alarmed. "You would-a do that?" he gasped.

"Of course I would, and I will, too, unless you engage me."

"Eet ees more than I can-a comprehendible. Eef I pay you, you will-a help-a me; not pay you, then-a you be against me."

"Bet your life on it. I have got an iron in the fire now, you see. I hate old Burry, as I said, and I have been wanting just some such chance to get at the girl. I will help you to carry her off and marry her."

"I will-a give you feefty dollars—that-a ees, if that-a was v'at—"

"Oh, take a drop to yourself on that, will you? I know that is your game, and you know I know it. Put up your fifty dollars, and I'm your man."

"Ver' well, I geeve you ze feefty dollar, and you help-a me."

"That is business. Give me the money, and we'll lay the plans. Or, you can pay me after the work is done, just as you please."

"Ah! now I can-a comprehendible that-a you are an honorable man. I will-a take you to help-a me, and-a I pay you ze twenty-five dollar now; ze remaindaire when-a ze work ees done."

"That suits me exactly!"

The Italian counted out the sum and passed it over.

"Now," he inquired, "how s'll we proceed with-a ze great-a work that ees to be done?"

"That is for you to say, first," responded Sharpe. "What plans have you got in mind for carrying out your scheme?"

"I have-a none. I have-a been trying to think-a how it might-a be done, but eet ees a puzzle incomprehensibilityable to-a me. What-a I want ees to marry ze little lady, and get her away to Italy."

"Exactly. I see. Now, nothing will be easier than that, if we put our minds to it. There may be a little expense, but you can stand that, you know. First, we must steal the girl, or lure her away, and get her into our hands. Then she must marry you, whether she will or not."

"Ah! but-a ze police!"

"We don't care a fig for the police."

"I thought-a if I could-a make ze lady love me— You laugh!"

"You wouldn't accomplish anything that way in a thousand years, with her. She must be made to marry you. That will be the first business, and after that the rest will be easy enough. But, I say, have you any place where the girl could be taken to and held a prisoner?"

"Yes, yes! I can have a room at-a my lodging, and-a ze woman she do what I tell-a her. She respect-a me, as I am ze Count Vanzini. I pay her well, and ze lady she not get away."

"Good enough. That is one point settled. Now, how does this plan suit? We will go to her house some afternoon—not you and I, of course, but some one who will act for us. Our man will go in a cab, and in all haste. He will tell the girl that her grandfather is dying, and must see her immediately. Not a second to be lost. The cab will take her. And a lot more like that. See?"

"Good-a, good-a!"

"I think it will work. She's smarter than I take her to be if she don't fall into the trap. She'll get into the cab, and the door will be locked upon her. Then it will be an easy matter to take her to your place, where we can be ready to receive her. I can do it without any mishap, I think."

"Eet ees good-a, good-a!" the Italian cried. "But eet ees ver' dangerous. Suppose ze police interfere, eet ees incomprehen—"

"But the police won't interfere," assured Sharpe. "We will take care of that part of it as well as we can, and you can trust me for the rest. If they should, we will lie to them, and say the girl is your daughter, or your wife—better still. You Italians marry your girls pretty young, you know."

"Yes, yes, that-a will be good-a."

"And then the rest of it will be simple enough. If you can make her marry you legally, all right. If not, we can get up a mock-marriage, and you can claim her anyhow. Then you will take passage on some steamer for yourself and wife, and you will have her in Italy before you know it. Once there, you can no doubt get along just as you want to. Now, how does that strike you, all around?"

"Eet ees grand-a, grand-a!" the rascal cried, rubbing his hands together.

"Well, then, if it suits you, that is what we will do. We will meet again in a day or two and fix everything up straight."

"Yes, and-a the sooner the better, Mistare Gillam. I am-a glad-a you hafe come to my help-a in ze great matter—"

ze great-a matter of a lifetime to me. Eet ees incom—"

"So you said before, but don't let that worry you. I have told you what my reason is for taking a hand in the game. I am either with you or against you, just as you please. Of course I am with you, since you have agreed to have it so."

"Yes, yes, you are with-a me, to be sure. But-a tell-a me, Mistare Gillam, v'at ees eet make-a you hate Mistare Burry like-a you say you do?"

"Oh, that can't concern you," Sharpe answered. "I can't tell you that. It has nothing to do with this matter, and so long as you get the girl, you needn't trouble your head about anything else."

Twenty minutes later saw the detective in the office of Hector Browden.

"Well," Browden demanded, "what luck?"

"Good luck, noble patron," was the response. "I have seen the Italian."

"And have worked yourself into his favor?"

"I have forced myself into his favor. He had to accept me."

"Well, you are the devil, I must say. How did you work that?"

"Told him I was either for or against him, just as he would have it, and he made up his mind he would rather have me for him."

"Then you have arranged with him about the girl?"

"Exactly. We are to steal her; he will marry her; then she will be taken off to Italy. That will be one out of the way. I am going for that half-million, you bet! And all New York shall not keep me from getting it, either."

"You are right there. We can defy the world. This will be one heir disposed of. There will be only four more to put out of the way, and we can make short work of them. Then the coast will be all clear for us to proceed. Oh, it is ours!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A GREAT SURPRISE.

What horrible thing was contemplated? Hector Browden's words, with those of Sharpe, disclose it.

They were determined upon wiping out the last of the Clayburn heirs, one and all!

"Yes, you are right, it is ours," responded Sharpe. "The devil himself could not keep us out of it now. A few mysterious deaths or disappearances, or both, and then success!"

"But, have you got your eye upon a man yet to play the role of long-lost heir?"

"No, I haven't. I'm looking around, and we shall find him all in good time. You see, the conditions he must fill is where the difficulty lies. He must be American, and a sailor."

"Exactly. He must be one who can play the part of Elias Clayburn, and with enough brain to carry it out, once he has learned it. The promise of a hundred thousand dollars if he succeeds will make him nerve himself."

"You are right it will. But, what about that cousin of yours?"

"I have seen her. Have told her that she must marry one of the heirs soon, or her chance will be gone. She and I will marry them if we can, you know, but if not— Well, the chances are all against me, so the other plans will be the ones likely to be resorted to."

"Oh, yes, and better so, too. You handle it all, that way, you know, and mind one thing," warned Sharpe, "no trying to draw back, or I will put the screws right on you."

"Do you imagine I am the man to draw back?" sneered Browden. "If you prove yourself my equal in the business, you will do well."

But, let us return to the old tenement.

Emily Woolruff was going about her duties, singing, as usual. She was beginning preparations for dinner, and as a mutton pie was to form the attraction, the duties were not light.

But, work did not prevent her from singing, and she went about trilling and warbling like a happy bird.

While she was singing, and doing credit to one of the Vasari airs that were the rage, a carriage came slowly along through the street—an open carriage, and its occupant a veiled woman.

When the carriage came opposite the tenement, and the rich young voice caught the woman's ear, she ordered her driver to stop.

She sat and listened to the end of the air, when she told the driver to pull in to the curb and let her out, which was promptly done.

When the woman had got out, she spoke to an Italian who was standing near, addressing him in his native tongue, asking:

"Do you know who was singing?"

"Yes, lady," he answered, "it was a girl who lives in this house."

"What is her name, and do you know in what part of the house her rooms are situated?"

"Her name is Emily Woolruff, lady, and she lives in the rooms where you see the white curtains and flowers."

More questions followed, and when she had satisfied herself, the woman went boldly into the old "barracks" and made her way up the stairs.

As she went up, the girl was singing again, and guided by the voice, she was soon at the right door.

There she stopped and listened attentively until the singing ceased, when she knocked.

Emily had just deposited her work of art, the pie, in the oven, and was wiping her hands.

"Who can it be?" she asked herself, as she opened the door.

What was her surprise to find there a lady, richly dressed, though plainly, with a veil over her face.

"Are you Emily Woolruff, miss?" she inquired.

"Yes, ma'am, that's my name," the girl responded.

"May I come in?" the woman then asked. "I want to talk with you a minute or two."

"Certainly, come right in," the girl invited.

The woman stepped within, and when Emily had closed the door she invited her to the best room.

"No, I will sit down right here for a moment," the woman answered, helping herself to a chair as she spoke. "I heard you singing, and my curiosity brought me in to see you."

Emily blushed.

"Well, this is me," she responded. "You don't see very much."

There was something so innocent and frank about her answer that the woman had to smile.

"I do not agree with you there," she said. "I see a great deal in the future for you, if you only had training for that voice."

"Dear me! are you stuck on my singin', too?" Emily exclaimed. "You are as bad as the old monkey."

"And who is the old monkey, pray?" asked the woman.

"Why, he's a Eytalian that calls himself Count Vanzini, and he wants me to leave granddad and run off and marry him, so he can train my voice and make a star of me that will dim even Vasari."

"And do you think of doing anything of the kind?" the woman asked, gravely enough.

Emily laughed.

"I should smile out loud if I did," she responded.

"No, I should advise you not to. My advice is, however, to have your voice trained if you possibly can, and to begin immediately."

"I'd like to do it, first-rate, as I told granddad, but you see, I haven't the wherewith. I'd give anything if I could sing right and proper, same as Vasari can. I only wish I could."

"Then you do not know anything about music?"

"Not a thing, ma'm."

"Poor child! and with such a voice. Do you think your granddad, as you call him, would allow me to pay for your education?"

"Pay for my education—you!" the girl exclaimed. "What would you want to do that for? I don't know whether he'd let you or not, but I don't believe he would. He wants me right with him."

"I believe I will come and see him, anyhow, and propose it to him."

"You can do that if you want to, but I think he'll kick."

"When would I be likely to find him at home?"

"Oh, any night after six. But, say! who are you, anyhow?"

The question was right out blunt, in the girl's usual way.

"Well, I'm Signorina Vasari."

The answer was prompt and startling in effect. Emily let the damp towel fall from her hands, and stood silent and gaping.

"Vasari!" she finally exclaimed, when the power of speech returned to her.

"Are you, really?"

"Yes, I am she, really and truly," the woman assured. "I was riding through this street when I heard your voice, and I was determined to find out something about you."

"And do you say I kin sing?"

"Yes, I say you can sing. You can sing as well as I could at your age."

"That settles it!" cried Emily, determinedly. "If we come into our fortune, I know what I'll do with my share of it. I'll take it and learn to sing right and proper, that's what I'll do."

"Your fortune? Are you an heiress, then?"

"Oh, yes; if there's anything in it, I am."

"Well, I hope there is, for your sake. But if your grandfather will give his consent, and you are willing, I will take you and educate you myself."

"Well, I don't know; but I'm afraid he will kick, as I said. He wants me right here, and he thinks there ain't nobody kin make a mutton pie equal to mine. Oh, I must look to this one!"

She sprang to the oven to examine the delicacy, and the savory odor filled the room.

"If it's as good as it smells," remarked the signorina, "I don't blame him for wanting you near him. It must be a treat."

"You'd think so, if you could see him jab it and wade into it," laughed Emily, as she closed the stove door again.

"I have no doubt it is good, and nothing would please me so well as to come and take dinner with you and your grandfather some night when you have mutton pie. Would you have me?"

"Have you! Bet your life we would! We'd kill the fatted calf, as I've heard Old Gabriel tell about, and have a bang-up time!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

VASARI-MONTE CRISTO.

The "Queen" laughed heartily. She realized that she had found a "character."

"And who might Gabriel be, my little friend?" she made inquiry.

"Why, Gabriel Weeks, granddad's old chum. He comes to see us once a week, and this is his night."

"Who is your grandfather, by the way? What does he do? You will not be offended if I ask questions, will you?"

"No, of course not, if you'll let me do the same."

"Very well; ask what you will."

"All right. But, granddad—he's a knife-man on Broadway. He sells knives, you know."

"I see. Is he an old man?"

"Oh, yes, he's gettin' pretty old now. But, say, how much money do you make a-singin'?"

Emily's questions were likely to be startlingly personal.

"One thousand dollars a night, now," was the matter-of-fact answer.

"Whew!" Emily whistled.

"And the same prize is before you," the "Queen" added.

"Granddad wouldn't never hear to it," said Emily, "not if it was a million. He calls it a disgrace."

"There are two sides to that question," remarked Vasari. "There are singers and others who disgrace the stage, but I never knew that the stage disgraced its votaries."

"Well, I don't know anything about it," the girl commented, "but that is the way granddad looks at it, and he would kick, you bet. I don't care nothin' about the stage, though; all I want is to know how to sing right and proper."

"And you shall know, too, if your grandfather will allow me to take you under my charge. I will provide for him, and see that he has his mutton-pie, too."

"I don't know how it would go," said Emily, "but he might agree to it when you mentioned the pie. You would hold that back for the last, you know."

Again did Vasari laugh.

"You lay much store by your grandfather's weakness for mutton-pie, I see."

"If you could only see him store mutton-pie away once," was the rejoinder, "you wouldn't think he has a weakness for it. He's all strength there, I tell you. But, say, be you married?"

"No, I'm not married," was the frank answer.

"And you are gettin' a thousand a night all for yourself! Jimminy!"

"But, about this fortune of yours, will you tell me something about that?" the signorina asked.

"Why, yes, I'll tell you all about it, if you want to hear it."

"I should like to hear about it, if you are at liberty to tell me. It may be that I will see a chance to help you regarding it."

"Only wish you could," cried Emily.

"I have been wantin' to get some lawyer at it, but granddad has been coaxin' me off, sayin' he don't believe it would pay for the trouble."

"Then it is not a big fortune?"

"Well, I don't know. The papers calls it a matter o' millions. Maybe you have seen mention of it in the papers."

"What! It is not the Clayburn case, that has been mentioned in connection with the suicide of that old lawyer, is it?"

"Yes, that's just what it is. You have read about it, then?"

"Why, yes; but it does not seem possible that you are heir to so great a sum. But, there are others, of course."

"That's where the pain lays," declared Emily, carelessly. "Granddad says there may be a thousand of 'em. But I'd like to try for it."

"But, tell me, in what relation do you stand to Clayburn?"

"Well, my granddad is a grandson of the old fellow, that's how. But, you see, he can't prove it."

"Ah! he hasn't a clear line, or rather the proof of a straight descent."

"Somethin' like that."

"Well, tell me all you can about it."

Emily took another look to see how the pie was coming on, and finding it all right, proceeded to tell all she could about the matter.

Vasari listened attentively to every word.

"Have you heard of Prince Monte Cristo?" were the first words she spoke.

"Yes, ma'm," Emily answered.

"Well, he will take hold of this matter, and if it is possible to get proof, it shall be procured for you."

"Why, how do you know he will?" asked Emily.

"Because I know he will. But, do not mention to any one that I have told you this. He will take hold of the case for you."

"All right; just as you say."

"I will call again, when your grand-

father is at home, and will talk with him. You may tell him I have been here, and that I am going to help you and him. But, do not mention Monte Cristo. Tell him it is Vasari who is going to do it."

"Yes, ma'm; I understand."

"And if you want a friend, come to me."

"You bet I will, if your gilt-edge servants would let me in."

"And they will let you in. Only mention your name, and it will admit you. But—" and the signorina hesitated.

"But," repeated Emily.

"I was about to say that, if I should not be at home, and it were really important, you might go to Monte Cristo."

"Jimminy! how would he know me?"

"Only mention your name that is all. But, it is not likely that you will have any occasion to do that. Mind, no mention of this to any one. That is, no mention of Monte Cristo."

"All right. But, say, what's Monte Cristo to you?"

It was right to the point.

"He is nothing to me," was the answer. "I cannot explain any more. And, I must be going. I will bid you good-by for this time."

She rose and stepped to the door.

"And you'll come again?" asked Emily.

"Yes, I will drop in some evening after six."

"And, if you please, ma'm, I would like to hear you sing once, so I kin know what right and proper is."

"You want to hear me sing? Why did I not think of it? It will be a treat to you and your grandfather—if he will go with you. Let me see."

She took from her pocket a neat little memorandum-book, and studying it carefully for a moment, took a card from a pocket it contained and wrote upon it.

Handing that card to Emily, she said:

"There, my little friend, this will admit you and your grandfather to good seats at the opera next Wednesday night. It will be good only on that night, and no other, so, if you want to hear me sing, you must go then."

"Oh, thanks!" cried the girl, delightedly. "We will be there, you bet. I will tell granddad if he don't go I'll never make him another mutton pie."

"Perhaps that will win him over. I hope so, anyhow. And now, good-by."

With that she dropped her veil, opened the door, and was gone, leaving Emily to look after her wonderingly.

She passed out of the house, and Emily, having run to the window, saw her enter her waiting carriage and drive rapidly out of sight.

"Well, if it don't beat all!" the girl exclaimed to herself, looking at the card she held in her hand. "It don't seem as if it can be real. I must 'a' been dreamin', sure."

Putting the card away in a safe place, she gave her attention to the pie, and sung all the more as she went about her duties as housekeeper, watching the clock anxiously for her grandfather's hour of coming.

The hour came around at last; the oven door was wide open now, and the cups were ready for the pouring of the tea.

Soon heavy and slow steps were heard on the stairs, then along the hall toward the door, and the door opened and Anthony Burry entered.

Emily sprang to meet him, as ever, relieving him of his load and then greeting him with a kiss, cheerily asking him how he was, to which he responded "as usual."

"Pretty well, but pretty tired, eh?" she framed in words.

"That is just about it, Emily, just about it," was the response. "My! but it does seem homesome here! And, ah! what is it I smell? Not a mutton pie!"

"That's what it is, granddad, you bet!" he was promptly assured.

This little piece of by-play was in-

dulged in on every occasion when a mutton pie was the attraction.

"And there's nothin' I like half so well as mutton pie," the old man declared.

"Well, hurry up and get washed, then, and you can jab in for all you're worth. Only you mustn't eat too much of it, you know."

"No use to warn me, not a bit. You can't stop me when I git started at a mutton pie. But where is Gabriel? It is time he was along. This is his night, as the mutton pie proves."

"Yes, it's his night, and he'll be along. You ain't goin' to let the pie get cold a-waitin' for him, though. If he don't know when—But here he comes, now."

A hurried but draggy step was heard, and the door soon opened, admitting Gabriel Weeks.

"Blessed little shady spot in the burnin' desert of dreary life!" he exclaimed, clasping his hands and looking around. "We'll talk about these little rests when we get over yander, Ant'ny, boy."

The next moment his hands unclasped, the two old men embraced affectionately, and then Gabriel gave particular greeting to Emily.

In a few minutes they were seated at the board, and when grace had been said, old Anthony proceeded to "jab" the pie.

As usual, the merits of the pie came in for first discussion, to flatter and please the little housekeeper. Then the business outlook in the line of knives came up for debate. After that the talk was upon less weighty matters.

"You can't guess the latest," Emily presently broke out. "You couldn't guess in a month of Sundays."

"Not that skunk of an Eyetalian again!" gasped old Anthony, gripping his knife.

"Nor yet another offer o' marriage?" questioned Gabriel.

"No, no, neither one. Oh, you couldn't never guess it. Vasari, the great singer, has been here, right here in this room; and she sat right there on that chair!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

OLD BURRY'S ANXIETY.

As well have said the Queen of England had been there. That statement would have occasioned no more surprise than the one made.

"Impossible!" cried old Anthony. "You must be dreamin', Emily, or else you are tryin' to fool us."

"And she is only jokin', can't you see she is, Ant'ny, boy?" put in Gabriel. "Might as well tell us an angel has been here."

"And she is a angel!" cried Emily. "Oh! she has been here sure enough, and no foolin' about it. And if you don't believe me, look at this!"

She jumped up as she was speaking, ran to a corner where her work-box stood, and brought out the card the signorina had given her, holding it up with pride to prove her statement.

"Bless me," said Gabriel, "whatever has she got?"

"She will have to tell us," the grandfather made response.

"It's a free pass to the opera, that's what it is," declared Emily, joyously. "And it's got Vasari's own name on it, too!"

"A pass to the opera!"

"And Vasari's own name on it!"

So the two old men exclaimed, as they looked at one another.

"It knocks you silly, don't it?" laughed Emily. "It knocked me silly, too, and I'd believe I had been dreamin', only for this."

"It is more than I kin understand," admitted Anthony; "it beats my time."

And he shook his head and made another "jab" into the pie.

"Come," he added, "we kin talk and eat together, I guess."

"Yes, yes, don't let your pie git cold,

Ant'ny, boy," said Gabriel. "You hadn't orter mentioned it till your granddad was done, Emily."

"Mebby not," the girl responded, having put the card away and resumed her place, "but I couldn't hold in any longer. I had to tell it or bu'st. Why, it was all I could do to wait till you got here, granddad."

"But, what brought Vasari here?" the grandfather asked, when he had got well into the pie again.

"That's so, I haven't told you about it, have I?" exclaimed Emily.

"Just what I would like to know, too," remarked Gabriel.

"Well," said Emily, "she was in her carriage, seein' the sights down in this part of the city, and she was passin' through this street when she heard me a-warblin', and she stopped and come in. And, granddad, what do you think she said?"

"Somethin' to turn your head, I'll be bound," was the answer.

"What I fear, too," croaked Gabriel.

"Nothin' of the sort," cried Emily. "I am level enough in the upper story, you bet. But, she says I kin sing just as good as she could at my age, and she says I'd orter have my voice trained."

"I knowed it," muttered Anthony, "I knowed it."

"And, that ain't all she said, either," the girl went on. "She says if you are willin' she will take me and pay to have me educated, so's I will know how to sing right and proper."

The two old men nearly choked.

Anthony laid down his knife and fork.

"Now, Emily," he remarked, as he pushed back his chair, "tell me just what the woman did say. This thing has got to be settled, one way or another, as I kin see plain enough."

"Well, it can be soon told," responded the girl. "She says she'll take me and educate me, and take care of you, too, and see that you have your mutton-pie. And, what's more, she is goin' to help us to get that fortune."

"W—what!"

"I say she is goin' to help us get that money that's comin' to us," and Emily told all that had passed between her and the signorina, everything except mention of Monte Cristo.

"And she's comin' to see me?" interrogated the old man.

"Yes, that's what she said she'd do."

"Gabriel, what is goin' to be done?" Anthony asked, turning to his friend.

"I don't know, Ant'ny, boy, I don't know," said Gabriel.

"Am I goin' to say yes, or no, to this?"

"I don't know; I don't know."

"No, nor I don't know. Emily, child," stroking her hair, "I want to do only what is best for you, even if it was to lay down my old life for you. But I don't want to see you make no mistake."

"Well," said Emily, "there's one thing certain. It can't be no mistake for me to be educated and know how to sing right and proper, and it can't be no mistake to get that money if we kin. Them's two sure things."

"And the girl is right, Ant'ny, boy, the girl is right," coincided Gabriel. "Them's two things that's plain."

"But," argued the grandfather, "we don't know nothin' about this woman, and the next thing would be singin' on the stage."

"She is a lady," exclaimed Emily, quickly. "You kin tell that right off as soon as you look at her. And as to singin' on the stage, she says it is as honorable as anythin' else."

Both the old men shook their heads sadly.

"But," the girl went on, "s'pose you let it rest till she comes and you kin see her yourself. Then when you have talked with her you will know better what ought to be done. But, there's one thing you must do for me, granddad."

"And what's that, child?"

"You must take me Wednesday night to hear her sing."

"I expected that was a-comin'," the old man sighed. "I can't promise. But I will think about it."

"Because I want to hear her," Emily explained. "I want to know just what right and proper is. And then I'll make just the very best mutton-pie you ever did eat in your life."

"Well, well, I'll see about it. Mebby I will."

"But if you don't," the girl gave warning, "then I won't never make another mutton-pie for you at all. And that would hurt me more than I kin tell, granddad. I hope you'll take me, for it ain't askin' much."

"I'll think about it, Emily, and mebby I will, mebby I will."

Never had the two old men spent so dreary an evening together as this proved to be. A cloud had settled upon the hearth, so to say, and it would not lift. They both felt that the fate of this pure young girl hung upon the events and influences of the next few days. Would not her voice prove her ruin?

Sooner than take her to the opera, or allow her to go there, would old Anthony Burry have cut off his right hand, almost. And yet, what was he to do? How was he to get out of it?

It would never do, he was well aware, to use harsh means or attempt it. It were better to yield than to use force. While, as to allowing this singer to take his grandchild and educate her, that would be equivalent to placing her on the stage.

Gabriel Weeks made his visit shorter than he had ever been known to do before since he had been coming there regularly. Nor was Emily asked to sing for them, as had always been the custom on these occasions heretofore.

When Gabriel took his leave, Anthony went with him down to the street, and there they paused to talk over the situation.

"What am I goin' to do, Gabriel?"

"I only wish I could tell you, Ant'ny, boy," was the doleful reply.

"How kin I be the one to take the child to sich a place of iniquity as the opera? I would be ashamed to be seen there myself."

"You can't do it, Ant'ny, nohow. She must not go there. Her head is near enough turned now, and that might put on the finishin' touch and drive her jest crazy to get on the stage herself."

"I know it; I know it; but how am I to git out of it?"

"Couldn't you make away with that ticket?"

"I have thought of that."

"It might be done."

"But it would be mean, Gabriel, awful mean, when she is so good to me."

"That's so; that's so. But it is all for her good, you know. It might ruin her to see the opera."

"I wish she had never had no voice at all; I do honestly. She is jest of the age now to be spoiled. I wish the woman had kept away from her."

"Yes; for it looks as if there was as much danger from her, in one way, as from the Eytalian who wants to marry her. Poor child; I don't know what you will do for her good."

Neither saw the man who was clinging close to the shadow by the doorway—a thin, wiry-looking, hawk-faced man in black, with a look of devilish cunning upon his face.

"Tell you what I kin do," reflected Anthony.

"And what's that?" inquired Gabriel.

"I kin play off that I'm sick when Wednesday comes around."

"Ha! that is jest it. That will keep her home by you, and she'll never suspect."

"And she'll never complain, either," declared Anthony. "She's all love and patience with me, is Emily. That is the only way I can think of to keep her from that awful place, Gabriel."

And that plan was decided upon, and they soon parted. Little did they imagine they were playing right into the hands of the girl's worst enemy. When they had gone, Isaac Sharpe came forth from his hiding, rubbing his hands in a highly satisfied manner.

CHAPTER XXV.

SOME DESPERATE PLAYS.

Never was a man more surprised. Lewellyn Dalorme could not believe he had read aright. He read the note through again, and several times.

It was a note from Rowena Hymilton, and was nothing less than a proposal of marriage, pure and simple.

Dalorme paced the floor, lost in study, the note in hand. Never in his experience thus far had he been more thoroughly astonished, and he was at loss how to take it.

That the writer meant all she said, was plain enough. She was all alone in the world, she said, and loving Dalorme, would not let mere form keep her from telling him so, since their stations in life were the same, and their fortunes about equal.

"I am at a loss what to say or do," Dalorme mused. "This goes ahead of any experience I ever had. I do not love this woman; she is not to my liking. I must decline the favor, most assuredly."

It certainly was a strange proceeding, from his limited point of view. The reader, however, can appreciate the degree to which the woman had stooped.

Urged on by Hector Browden, she was desperate in her effort to marry one of the heirs to the Clayburn fortune before it was too late. And this was one of the outcomes of her very desperation.

"No, I haven't the nerve to do it," he finally decided. "It would be disagreeable for me, and no doubt mighty embarrassing for her. No, I'll write, that's the only way out of it. And I'll do it at once, and cut her suspense as short as possible. I'll do it in one minute."

That was his intention, fully, but he did not finish the letter in one hour. It was about the hardest task in English composition he had ever undertaken.

At last it was done, however, and going out, he dropped the letter into a post-box, with a sigh of relief.

When the letter came to Rowena Hymilton's hands, she opened it with eager haste.

"Just as I expected," she snapped hatefully. "I might have known it would have been so. Now, that settles that chance forever. I have only one other, and I must try that and see what the result will be. Fortunately, I have met Mr. Dentway."

The afternoon mail brought a note to Henry Dentway. It requested him to call upon Miss Hymilton upon a matter of the utmost privacy.

A reporter, and keenly alive to everything that smacked of news or mystery, Dentway was soon in Miss Hymilton's presence.

"You received my note, of course, Mr. Dentway?" the woman remarked.

"Yes, and am here in accordance with your request," was the answer.

"I am almost tempted to withdraw from my intention, now that you have come," said Rowena, her eyes seeking the floor.

"May I inquire into the nature of the matter?" Henry suggested. "Is it something in the way of news—as you know my calling? Or is it something of a personal nature?"

"If you could only read my thoughts—if your own heart responded in sympathy," Rowena returned.

The young reporter was bewildered.

"You no doubt remember the first time we met," the woman went on. "The impression I received of you then is what has led to this that I am about to confess to you. You know me, who and what I am. I am alone in the world,

have something of a fortune in my own right, and flatter myself that I am not without personal charms. I love you, Henry Dentway, and—and offer myself to you in marriage—"

"Good heavens!" the young reporter exclaimed, excitedly. "I—I—beg your pardon, Miss Hymilton, but I was not looking for anything of this sort. Am I to take it that I have heard aright?"

Rowena's eyes were fixed upon the floor, her hands were clasped in her lap, and her whole manner spoke great embarrassment.

"I mean what I have said," she declared.

"But this is so unlooked-for, that I am not prepared to answer, Miss Hymilton. I must have time to collect my thoughts. It seems impossible that you can mean what you have said, or that—"

"But I do mean it, Henry Dentway. From that hour when we met I have loved you, earnestly, honestly, and rather than go with such a hungry heart I resolved to tell you, and—But you despise me, you must despise me for it."

She covered her face with her hands and wept, or pretended to.

Dentway was in about the worst dilemma he had ever been in in his life, and hardly knew how to turn.

He looked at the matter as deliberately as he could. Here was a young woman who moved in the circle of the elite, good-looking, and with something of a fortune, offering herself to him. To marry her would be to step at once upon the social plane she was on. And it meant freedom from the toil of a reporter's life.

"No, I do not despise you," he answered, honestly. "I have more a feeling of pity, believing you are honest and earnest in what you have said."

"And I am. You can make me happy by allowing me to become your willing slave for life, if necessary. Or, you can make me utterly miserable."

"I must go, and that immediately," said Dentway, abruptly. "This is so unexpected, and so unusual, that I cannot have command of my thoughts sufficiently clear to answer you. Give me one day to think it over, and you shall have my answer."

He moved to the door, and at first she made no attempt to rise. As he reached the door, however, she rose, crossed the room hastily, and taking his hand for one moment, said, passionately:

"You have said that you pity me; let your pity guide your answer. Go, go!"

With gentle touch she pushed him out, and the door closed.

Dentway moved off in thoughtful mood.

"If it were Sharpe in my place," he muttered, "he would say it beats—the old fellow, and he would be about right, too. If this don't yank the savory bun, then I'm a gilly. But what the deuce am I to say to the woman?"

That question was not easily answered, even in his mind. It was late at night when his mind was finally made up.

He had decided in a sane and sensible manner. He would propose a probation of a year, to give him a chance to decide his fate for a lifetime, and if she really loved him, as she had confessed, she would agree to his proposal.

The next morning's mail brought her a note to that effect.

Upon reading it, she flew into a rage, tore it to bits, and flung it into the grate.

"It must be now or never," she muttered. "This is half a concession. I believe, and I will strike again immediately."

Writing another letter, she sent it by messenger, requesting a reply by the bearer. She must have his decided answer, as he had promised the day previous.

In due time the answer was in her hands, and it was a decided—No.

A few minutes after she had received the answer, Hector Browden entered her presence.

His face showed that he was in no gen-

the frame of mind, and he threw himself into a chair with a muttered oath.

"What is the matter with you?" snapped Rowena.

"I have just received the coolest dismission I ever experienced, that's all," he grated.

"How was that?" she inquired.

"Why, I have just come from Josephine Blarcome's presence, with her final adieu. I proposed to her, and she took my proposal as an insult, or the next thing to it. But she shall pay for it, curse her!"

Rowena laughed.

They were a pretty pair, these cousins.

"Your luck is about as good as mine," she said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, I have proposed to both Dalorme and Dentway, and neither would have me. But I am not disappointed. I wanted the thing settled, so I could go for a share of that fortune in another way."

"You might have known they would refuse you. But, what other plan are you hinting at?"

"I'll tell you. You are determined to have those millions. I am as determined to have a share. You will divide your portion with me, Hector, or I will expose the whole scheme," and her look showed that she meant what she said.

Browden paled, as though he had been struck.

"Never!" he hissed. "The sum will be small enough when I get it. Not a dollar of it will you get."

"Then I will tell what I know, as sure as you live. You were willing that I should receive a share by marrying one of the heirs; I demand just the portion one of those men is entitled to. And I will have it, too!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN UNEXPECTED EVENT.

Hector Browden paced the floor in a rage. This was something he had not counted on in his evil scheming. Only one chance had he allotted to this distant cousin, and that was the slim chance of marrying one of the heirs.

And even in that event he had calculated against her success, with the secret hope of barring her out, but he had met his match in her in the end.

His rage increased with each moment. He saw his share in that fortune growing smaller at every turn. What with half a million to Sharpe, to still his tongue in the matter, and a large sum to the man who would play the part of lost heir, and now this demand, it would be reduced one-half.

"I say you shall never have it!" he cried, after a few turns up and down.

"Oh, yes, I will," returned Rowena, confidently. "I could send you to prison, and you know it."

"You are a fool!" hissed Browden, "and you must take me for one. You have had two good chances, and if you could not gain one of them you deserve to lose. It is not my fault."

"You know I cannot marry one of the heirs now."

"And I know if you don't your chance is gone. No use your threatening me, either. That won't help you any."

"You know better when you say that, Hector Browden. You know that you dare not have me tell what I know, and I know more than you may think—"

Browden grew pale again, and he faced her suddenly.

"Curse you!" he cried, "what do you know?"

"You will find out, if you force me to tell."

"And I'll force you to tell now."

"Do not try it."

Utterly beside himself, the rascal caught the woman by the throat, holding his free hand clinched as though he would strike her.

"Tell me what you mean by your words," he demanded, "or it will be the worse for you."

The woman made one ineffectual attempt to free herself from his grasp, but he held her too tightly, and the next moment an awful thing happened.

Rowena Hymilton, long subject to heart disease, suddenly slipped from her chair with his hand still at her throat.

"Curse it," Browden exclaimed, "she's fainted. Just like a woman. What was she hinting at? Could she know that secret?— But no! impossible! I am too easily frightened."

He had let go of her now, and stood looking down at her as she lay helpless at his feet.

"Dast it!" he muttered, "is it a faint? or—or is she dead?"

Stooping as he spoke, he discovered the horrible truth, and his brain reeled. What awful thing had he done again?

A profuse perspiration was on his brow in a moment, and while he wiped it off he tried to gather his thoughts to consider what he should do.

"What made me do it?" he asked himself. "I might have known it would be dangerous. Now I am in a fix, sure enough. What am I to do? Shall I call a servant and say she died suddenly? No, no! That won't do, for there is the mark of my hand on her throat."

He was in a desperate situation, but his very desperation forced him to calmness.

"I came in without ringing," he said, to himself, "and perhaps I was not seen. If I can get out again in the same way— But, no, no! That won't do. I do not know that I was not seen. Perhaps I was. I must take my leave about the same as usual, speaking to Rowena as I go out. No other way will be safe, and even that is taking big risks. But that or nothing, and I must not hesitate."

He went to the door and listened.

No one was heard moving and he passed out.

"Well, I will call again in a day or two," he said, aloud, as he stepped at the door and turned back. "Yes, I will do so," after a moment's pause, to give the impression that some one in the room had spoken. "Yes, all right," after another pause. "Good-by."

With that he shut the door, and in a moment more was out of the house and hurrying away.

He made no delay in that neighborhood, but reached his office as soon as he could.

Sharpe was there in the hall awaiting him.

"What word?" he greeted.

"The devil's to pay," answered Browden. "Come in."

He unlocked the door and entered, Sharpe following.

"What is it?" the detective asked.

"You look all cut up."

"That cousin of mine is dead," explained Browden.

"What! Dead? How and when did she die?"

"She died suddenly and within the hour," was explained.

"And what did you have to do with it?" looking at his man keenly.

"I'll give it to you straight, and in a few words," answered Browden. "I went there a little while ago, and I was in no good humor. I had just made an offer of marriage to Miss Blarcome and been refused. That settled that, for me. As it happened, Rowena had offered herself to the other two marriageable heirs, and ended her chances for all time. But she had another scheme on foot. She wanted to force me to give her a share, anyhow. I flew into a rage and caught hold of her throat. She went off into a spell and died then and there."

As they were both in the same boat, Browden dared trust Sharpe with this, since he already had the other secret.

"That is a mighty ugly thing, Browden, unless you can clear yourself of it all. What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything but get away as soon as I could," and Browden told about the little ruse he had played.

"Well, it may come out all right," considered Sharpe. "I don't know but she is better out of our way, if you can keep from getting mixed up in it."

"And I hope I can. I know I can if no one there saw me."

"Well, there is a chance that no one did. But that remains to be seen when the discovery is made. You will have to be on your nerve."

"Yes, I know it, and I'll try to, you bet. We must be ready for anything and everything that turns up, Sharpe."

"Well," Sharpe now remarked, "I have found the long-lost Elias Clayburn for you."

"You have! Who is he?"

"A sailor who answers to the name of Henry Sweet, whom I picked up in Water street last night."

"And does he fill the bill?"

"He fills it right up. We couldn't find a better man. He hits the right age within a month, if he has told me the truth, and I guess he didn't lie. He is American by birth, but don't know anything about his parentage. He is smart, has a little education, and when I sounded him he flew at the bait like a hungry trout at a fly."

"Good enough. I haven't any fear but I can trust your judgment in that. I leave it all to you, you know."

"Yes, and so I want you to do. We must handle this affair with exact care. The man must learn his part by heart before a move is made."

"Certainly. We will furnish him with an old pocket Bible, as we planned, and in it will be the record of his family, straight and correct, right back to the original Clayburn. Things have played right into our hands. He will come to me with this proof of his identity, and tell me he saw the account of the suicide of Mr. Hamman in the paper, and the mention of the Clayburn millions, and comes to see if he don't come in for a share. I will welcome him heartily and open the case. By that time the other heirs will have been disposed of, and the field will be clear. Then, when the case is on I will discover among my uncle's secret papers the record of the Clayburn family. The note that Elias Clayburn was drowned at sea will be taken out. And then a little open search will reveal the fact that he is the only living heir, and he will get the plum. Oh, it is bound to succeed; it can't help it, now."

Just then came a knock at the door.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A NEW HAND IN THE GAME.

Sharpe drew quickly back from the desk.

Browden straightened around and appeared busy with papers.

"Come right in," he invited.

The door opened, and greatly to the surprise of Hector Browden and his companion, who should enter but "Prince" Monte Cristo.

"Why, my dear Monte Cristo," Browden cried, springing up, "this is a pleasure I never expected to experience. What good fortune has brought you here? Here, sit right down and make yourself at home."

And he gave his hand most heartily, and then drew up a chair for his distinguished guest.

"I am here on business, as it happens," the "Prince" declared, responding to the hearty reception. "I didn't know that I should find you here, though Browden. I knew that was the name, but had no idea of meeting you."

"This is my den," Browden assured, "and here is where I spend some hours daily, since my uncle's sudden death. I want to wind affairs up as speedily as possible, though, and get out of it. I like to be free. Would not be here, you know, only for the old gentleman's will."

"Yes, yes, I see. You are the man, then, who has this Clayburn matter in hand, are you?"

Browden and Sharpe were amazed.

"Yes, it is in my hands," Browden owned.

"Well, it is concerning that that I am here."

The two rascals fairly quaked in their boots now. What in all wonders could Monte Cristo have to do with the matter?

It was only by a great effort that Browden could appear unconcerned, and it required a greater effort to keep from looking at Sharpe.

"Very well, sir," he responded, "I am at your service in any way you desire. It is impossible for me to imagine what interest you can have in that case, though."

"So I suppose. Personally, I have no interest in it. But, may I speak out freely regarding it before this gentleman?" indicating Sharpe. "I rather desired a private interview."

"I am sure Mr. Sharpe will oblige us," said Browden, turning around, with a wink to the detective as he did so, to signify that he had better withdraw.

This was much against Sharpe's inclination, but there was no way out of it.

"Certainly, certainly," he said, promptly enough. "Beg pardon for being so thoughtless."

"Rather pardon me," exclaimed Monte Cristo, quickly. "Perhaps your business was not done, sir, and I am intruding. If so, I will—"

"Not at all, not at all," Sharpe broke in, motioning him to keep his seat, as he made for the door. "Was merely having a little chat with Mr. Browden, that was all, sir," and he passed out, leaving the office to the "Prince."

"Mr. Sharpe, a private detective," explained Browden. "Didn't consider it would be agreeable to you to be introduced. Now, sir, I am at your service."

"Well, I am interested in this affair in a peculiar way," Monte Cristo began. "It will not be necessary for me to go into the particulars. I will come to the important part of it direct. I believe there is a large fortune at stake in this Clayburn affair. Am I right?"

"You are."

"May I ask how large it is?"

"It amounts to some millions, I believe."

"Very good. Now what is required on the part of a claimant to get a rightful share of this fortune?"

"Well, two important things are necessary," Browden answered. "First, the applicant must prove direct descent from old Howell Clayburn. That done, he will be acknowledged a rightful heir. But, in order for him to get anything, he will have to learn how many other heirs are living, in order for the court to decide how much he is entitled to."

"Then it looks like a big task for any one to undertake. By the way, have you any idea how many heirs there are?"

"Not the slightest, sir."

"Well, suppose I can produce one heir and prove his claim. What will hinder him from carrying off the whole fortune if the matter is properly advertised for the proper length of time?"

Inwardly Browden felt himself losing his grip. Nothing could hinder the heir from getting the fortune, as he knew.

"I suppose the case could be terminated that way," he admitted.

"Good enough. There is some encouragement in that, anyhow. I am taking up the matter in behalf of an old man named Anthony Burry, who claims to be a grandson of the original Clayburn. I mean to push the matter in earnest, and hope to come at something in a short time. Now, Mr. Browden, is there any way in which you can help me?"

"If there is," was the response, "it will give me great pleasure to be of service to you."

"I believe you. But have you no record of the family from the original to some of his descendants? Anything that I could make a beginning with?"

"Not a thing, sir. My uncle may have had some such papers, but I have failed

to find them yet if he had. I will begin an extensive search at once, now that the case is likely to be opened anew."

"I wish you would, and if you find anything of interest let me know. You may be sure that you will be well paid for any help you can render."

"Don't speak of that," Browden waived. "I should be only too glad to get the matter off my hands."

"You are not a lawyer yourself, then, Mr. Browden?"

"No, not a regular lawyer."

"Too bad. I would put something in your way, if you were. But, no matter; do what you can for me, and you will lose nothing."

"And again I say, do not mention that," said Browden. "My satisfaction at seeing the money bestowed where it belongs will be my reward, to say nothing about having the burden taken off my hands."

"I can believe that. But, can you recommend a detective to me, in case I should need one? How about this Mr. Sharpe, who just went out?"

"He is an excellent man in his line," Browden exclaimed, "and I can recommend him heartily. You will find him smart and reliable. His charge is a little high, but his excellent service makes him worth all he asks."

"Will you give me his address? I am sorry now you did not introduce him to me."

"Yes, I can give you his address, of course; but, and better still, no doubt he is no further away than the street door, for he wants to see me again. I can call him in."

"Very well, do so."

Browden went out, and the door, on a spring, closed after him.

No sooner was he gone than Monte Cristo was on his feet, looking around the office, taking in everything. And, with movements that rivaled lightning, he clapped wax upon the keyhole of the door, the pigeon-hole case, the desk, and the safe, taking hasty but good impressions of all.

The wax disappeared immediately, and the "Prince" sat down, and he had little time to spare. The door soon opened, and Browden and Sharpe came in.

Sharpe was introduced, and Monte Cristo said:

"I may soon require the service of a good detective, and Mr. Browden has recommended you to me. Will you give me your card?"

"With great pleasure," responded Sharpe, bowing. "If there is anything in my line that I can do for you, I shall be glad to serve you. And if you want references, why—"

"Mr. Browden's word is all I could ask or require," interrupted the "Prince" there. "It is more than sufficient. And now, Mr. Browden, I will take my leave. You may hear from me again soon."

"The sooner the better," cried Browden, "if you can come with proof that will establish your old friend in his rights."

"Which I shall do, rest assured, if it is possible," was the assurance.

Monte Cristo went away, and the moment the door closed after him, Browden and Sharpe faced each other.

"What in thunder does this mean?" Browden demanded.

"It means that it beats the devil!"

"But what has mixed him up in the matter?"

"You ought to know more about it than I," reminded the detective, "seeing that you fired me out."

Browden told him all that had passed.

"I say it beats the devil!" Sharpe cried; "but let him engage me to work for him, and I'll bet I'll soon know more than I do now. I must know what this man and Signorina Vasari are to each other. He has not been near old Burry, but the singer has, and it is through her that he has taken up the case. It beats my time."

"She must employ him," suggested Browden.

"Impossible!" declared Sharpe.

And then he went ahead and told all about the matter—that the "Prince" and the "Queen" were never together for a moment, but were more like enemies than friends, as near as he could draw the line.

It was a mystery to them both, but one thing was plain: Monte Cristo was in the field against them, and they must consider him as their enemy. What was to be done with him? A question of great moment.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BROWDEN IN LUCK AGAIN.

Monte Cristo's carriage had been waiting at the door, and, springing into it, he gave directions to this driver, and was off, straight to Police Headquarters, where he sought the officer in charge.

"I want to know what you know about this man," he said presenting the card that had been given him by Detective Sharpe.

The officer smiled when he read the name.

"He is said to be smart," he answered, "but he don't rank very high. He is tricky, and just the man to take up dirty work that a respectable detective refuses. I guess that is plain enough, isn't it?"

"About what I expected to hear," said the "Prince," returning the card to his pocket. "I am not disappointed. I have just had him recommended to me as a most excellent man in his line, smart and reliable. But, I was not easily deceived."

"So it would seem," observed the police official. "And, while it is none of my business, unless you have something that you desire us to make our business, let me give you a tip to look out for the person who gave him that sort of recommendation. He is either deceived himself or he has tried to deceive you."

"I am not blind to the fact, sir," rejoined the "Prince."

"And is there anything we can do for you, Prince Monte Cristo?"

"Ha! you know me, then?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Well, there is nothing you can do, not at present, anyhow," was the reply. "I merely wanted to know Mr. Sharpe's standing. You will do me a service if you will not mention that I have been here."

"No mention will be made of it, sir."

"Thank you, and now good-day," and Monte Cristo was turning to go when a man entered the room hastily.

"What is it?" the officer asked.

"A mysterious death, maybe murder," the man explained.

"Who—where?"

Monte Cristo had paused, and the man, a detective, cast a look at him.

"You may speak out," said the officer.

"Well, it is a Miss Hymilton, a relation of that Lawyer Hamman, who killed himself awhile ago."

"Miss Rowena Hymilton!" exclaimed the "Prince." "I have met her several times since I have been in New York."

"What are the circumstances?" asked the officer.

"Rather peculiar," was the return. "She was found dead in her parlor by a servant. There is a mark on her neck, but it is only faint, and may mean nothing. I have not heard the doctor's opinion yet."

"What do the servants or other members of the household think about it?"

"She lived alone with two servants. They consider it very strange, but the older one says she was subject to heart trouble, so it may be only natural death after all."

"Well, what is there to make you think it is anything else?"

"The marks on the neck, as I said, for one thing, but two letters found in her pocket give the matter a peculiar turn."

"And what are these letters about?"

"They are from two men who decline an offer of marriage, which, as it appears, the woman had recently made to them."

"Well, that is peculiar," the officer commented.

"One bears the signature of Lewellyn Dalorme, a young blood of the upper ten, and the other is signed by Henry Dentway. I don't know who he is."

"I know a young reporter of that name," remarked the officer in charge, "but it isn't likely it's he."

Just at that moment the door opened and Henry Dentway stepped in.

"Speak of the devil and he appears," added the officer, laughing.

"Why, who has been taking my name in vain?" Dentway asked, looking around, and it was with some surprise that he saw Monte Cristo there.

"No one has taken it in vain," assured the officer, "for here you are. I mentioned it, and in you stepped. But a fine fellow you are, I must say, to refuse to marry a lady who offers herself to you."

Dentway, confused, looked around from one to another of the three present, and the officer and detective saw plainly that this was the Henry Dentway who was the author of the letter that had been found in the woman's pocket.

"What are you driving at?" Dentway demanded.

"You know well enough what," responded the officer.

"I can see that you are guessing at something, and want to lead me into a confession. I'm too wary for that. Come, let's have it right out, if you have got the corn on me in any way."

"Will I be intruding if I remain longer?" asked Monte Cristo now. "I am somewhat curious to learn more of this affair."

"Not at all," assured the officer, and turning to the reporter, he said:

"We happen to know all about it, Dentway. You will have something to write about now in which you will have more than a passing interest. Since you declined the generous offer made you by Miss Hymilton, she has departed this life—"

"What!" the reporter exclaimed, "Rowena Hymilton dead!"

"Exactly. Mysterious case. May be suicide. We don't know yet."

The young reporter was deeply moved.

"When did you hear about this?" he asked.

"When did she die?"

He was told all the particulars that were known.

"What a fool I was not to go in person and tell her what I had to say instead of writing it. Now my name has got to be associated with the deuced business. Hang me if I like it."

The officer laughed.

"The shoe is on the other foot this time, isn't it," he observed. "You have always taken fiendish delight in airing other people's affairs, now you can do the same for yourself."

"I would not care, if it did not show me up as such a gilly as to put anything of that sort on paper."

"Well, you will not stand alone, anyhow, if you can find any consolation in that. Another letter of the same sort was found with yours."

"What! What is that you say?"

Every moment found the young reporter more and more puzzled.

"It's exactly so," he was assured.

"She evidently offered herself to two men at about the same time."

"And who was the other?"

"Lewellyn Dalorme, if you know him."

"Yes, I know who he is. This looks like a deuced strange affair."

"It may not amount to anything, however," observed the detective. "It may turn out to be a sudden, natural death."

"I will hustle around there and learn what I can," cried Dentway. "I will have the one satisfaction of telling my

own story about my part in her matrimonial designs, anyhow."

"Yes, there will be some satisfaction in that," remarked the detective. "If you are going there now, I will go with you."

"I'll go at once. I merely dropped in to see if there was anything of importance on hand, and I'm glad I did. Come along," and the two departed.

"What do you think about this matter?" asked Monte Cristo.

"I don't know what to think of it," was the answer. "But there is no use troubling our heads with it, sir; it will all come out, and then we'll know."

"Yes, you are right, of course, but it is strange, as the young man said."

Monte Cristo soon took his leave, going home.

Let us accompany Dentway and the detective to the dead woman's house.

When they arrived it was just as the family physician was going away, after making an examination of the body with another doctor.

The detective chanced to be acquainted with him and stopped him to ask what he thought about it. Was it a natural death, or did he consider it suspicious?

"I think it is a natural death," was the answer. "Miss Hymilton had been afflicted with heart trouble for a long time, and some shock, perhaps, has cut her life short."

"Then there is nothing suspicious about it?" asked the reporter.

"No, I think not, sir."

"My friend, the detective here, mentioned something about marks on her throat. What about them?"

"If they were there," was the response, "they have disappeared now."

"And shall you give a burial permit?" asked the detective.

"Yes, I intend doing so. I see no reason why I should not."

The doctors passed on, and the reporter and the detective went into the house.

"How came the police to have anything to do with it, anyhow?" asked Dentway.

"Why, it seems one of the servants, in her excitement, ran out and called a policeman in, and he, excited, too, sent for the sergeant."

"And has any other reporter been here?"

"I don't know. We'll ask the sergeant."

It proved that no other reporter had been to the house, and that thus far the whole thing was comparatively a secret. Dentway knew the sergeant, and through him got hold of the letter he had written, as well as that of Dalorme, which he agreed to return to the writer.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RASCALLY DETECTIVE DAZED.

Henry Dentway was greatly puzzled. There was more in this than he could understand.

When he left the house, and as soon as he had parted company with the detective, he took from his pocket the note from Miss Hymilton, but it told him nothing.

Then he recalled the interview with her. But the more he pondered the deeper the mystery became.

"I'll have to apply Sharpe's phrase to it," he decided. "It does beat the horned gentleman, and more. The woman said she loved me, but she lied. Here is this letter from Dalorme to her to prove it. She told him the same thing, and it is plain she couldn't marry both of us. What the deuce does it mean?"

He decided to see Dalorme, and set out immediately, but Dalorme was not at home.

Being told, however, that he might find him at his club, at that hour, the young reporter went there.

Dalorme was there, and Dentway made himself known.

"What do you want?" Dalorme asked.

"Have you heard that Rowena Hymilton is dead?" Dentway asked.

"Rowena Hymilton dead! No, I had not heard about it. But, why do you bring this news to me?"

"Because I imagined it would interest you. A letter of yours was found in her possession."

"The deuce!" Dalorme cried. "That letter must not be published. Died of heart trouble, eh? It is deuced unpleasant, if the letter I sent her has had anything to do with it. If you have seen that letter—and by what you say I know you have—you understand the situation."

"Don't let that worry you," said the reporter. "She no doubt told you she loved you, but she lied."

"W-what! What is that you say?"

"I say she lied. Her trouble of the heart was not of that kind. Here is the letter you sent her, and here is another that was found in her pocket with it."

"By George, but I'm glad to get this letter into my hands again," muttered Dalorme, and he tore the letter in two immediately. "And this other, what about this? Who is it from?"

"Read it and see," said the reporter.

"Why, deuce take it! It is from yourself!"

"Exactly so. I wouldn't show it to any one else, but seeing that we are both in the same boat, I dare show it to you."

"This beats the dickens, by George!"

"I should say it does. But what can you make out of it? If the woman was in her right mind, what was her object in offering herself in marriage to us, and at about one and the same time?"

"I doubt whether she was in her right mind."

"Well, so do I; but the fact of what she did remains. I wish you would explain that to me."

"I only wish I could explain it. I am stumped completely. It goes ahead of anything I ever heard of. I was amazed when I got her proposal, but now I am more than amazed."

"In your case," Dentway remarked, "there is some reason for her action, if it had stopped at that. You are good looking, one of the leaders of your set, and not badly off in this world's goods. That she might fall in love with you, and even go so far as to offer herself in marriage, is possible; but, on top of that, and in the same day, she makes the same offer to me, a poor devil of a reporter, without a dollar to my name beyond my weekly pay."

"I am bewildered," acknowledged Dalorme. "I give it up."

"What an immense article it could write up!" the reporter exclaimed. "But the reporter is his own hero this time, and, as I am the only one who has got it, I shall not let it see the light."

"No, for goodness sake, don't let it go into print. Keep it out at any cost, for I have as much dread of the notoriety it would bring as you can have."

And so it was agreed that no mention of it was to be made, and, with the element of sensation and mystery left out, the death of Miss Hymilton could be told in three lines.

Two days went by and the dead woman was laid to rest.

It was on the morning after the funeral that Detective Sharpe appeared at the office of Browden.

"What a lucky dog you are!" he exclaimed.

"Why, what's on your mind now?" Browden asked, smiling.

"To think how easily you got out of that scrape."

"Oh, yes, it worked like a charm. The girl is laid away, and not even a thought of suspicion against me."

"And now we are to push the matter?"

"Yes, and it must be pushed hard. With Monte Cristo against us, we must do our work quickly and well."

"What do you propose first?"

"This is Wednesday. That girl Woolruff must disappear to-night."

"Right you are! Is it all arranged for?"

"Yes, everything is fixed."

"And how does your man Sweet come on?"

"Immensely! We are sure of winning with him."

"Good! But the greatest of all, how about Monte Cristo? What move has he made so far?"

"May the devil take him! I can't understand him at all. He has not done a thing that I am aware of. He is going to worry me into my grave, that fellow is."

"Why, how is that?"

"There is mystery about him. It is stamped all over him. Now you see him, now you don't. Paddy's flea wasn't a circumstance to him."

"Why, can't you keep track of him?"

"No, hang me if I can."

"I thought you were expert in your line?"

"I thought I knew a little about it, but here is a case that stumps me altogether."

"Well, come, explain something, so I can agree with you."

"Take this, for instance, then, though it is the only incident of the kind I have to tell. I watched the Prince to his house the other afternoon. I hung around to follow him when he came out. He did not come out. The only person who left the house was a servant, and she returned in about half an hour. Still I waited around. About half-past seven, who should come tearing down the street at a rapid walk but the Prince himself, and he entered the house for the second time."

"That is rather strange. How do you account for it?"

"I don't account for it."

"You must have given him a chance to go out when you were not looking."

"No, sir; I don't watch a man that way."

"Then he has gone out some other way, that's all."

"That seems plain enough. But, the question is, what other way?"

"I'll never tell you."

They were puzzled badly, both of them, and admitted it. There was more in the matter than they could understand.

"Then you think we have nothing to fear from the Prince, eh?" asked Browden.

"I don't say anything of the kind," cried Sharpe. "I don't pretend to know or understand anything about the fellow. He beats the devil! What I said was that he hadn't made any move so far as I know."

"Well, are you still of the opinion that Monte Cristo and Signorina Vasari are something to each other?"

"I am, and more than ever, but I am all in the dark."

"Don't they meet each other?"

"Not at all."

"Well, then, their servants must go back and forth."

"Not at all. I have had both houses watched. You see, when anything stumps me, I try to get at the bottom of it. Not a person goes from one house to the other."

"Well, then, they must use the mail, that's all."

"And they don't do that."

"How do you know?"

"My men have not seen either of them post a letter."

"Well, it does beat the deuce, sure enough. But you must be mistaken that they are anything to each other, that's all."

"What! After what we know? Wasn't it Vasari that found the Woolruff girl by hearing her sing? And isn't it Monte Cristo that is interesting himself in her behalf regarding this fortune?"

"Maybe he has come upon it in some other way."

"He hasn't been near old Burry or the girl."

"You make my head swim trying to grasp it."

"If it swims as badly as mine does over it I pity you."

"Well, what is going to be done about the Prince?"

"Nothing, now, that I can see. I mean to watch him closely, though, and if we find him dangerous, then— Well, we will consider him the same as one of the heirs, that's all."

CHAPTER XXX.

AT VASARI'S MUSICAL.

That Wednesday morning had found Anthony Burry sick, but the reader will understand that it was the beginning of a pretended illness to balk the proposed opera trip.

His granddaughter was doubly solicitous. There was first her honest concern for him, and then her fear that this would prevent the treat to which she had been looking forward so eagerly.

Her grandfather had made a sort of half-way promise that he would go, but had put in the clause "if nothing turns up." And now there was danger that something would turn up. Though she could not be sure of it, it was certain that something would.

"I don't know how it will be, Emily, I don't know how it will be," said the old man, as he left the house. His illness was not severe enough to keep him home, although he declared that he felt wonderfully bad. "We will have to go, I suppose, if I don't get no worse. But we'll see."

"Of course, if you are sick, granddad, I wouldn't think of goin'," assured the girl, "but you must be careful of yourself, and mebbly you will be better by night. You know I do want to go so bad. Mebbly I'll never have another chance in my life to hear right and proper singin', and I'm just crazy to go. And there can't be the least bit of harm in it, if you are with me, you know."

So the morning opened with a prospect of disappointment that made it impossible for the girl to sing as she went about her household duties.

It was drawing toward noon when there came a rap at the door, and opening it, Emily found there Signorina Vasari.

"And how is my little lady this morning?" the signorina greeted, cheerfully.

"Oh, I'm kickin' around as usual," Emily responded.

She invited the caller in, and placed a chair for her.

"I have only a minute to stay," Vasari explained. "I have called to ask a favor of you."

"A favor of me! What can it be?"

"I will tell you. I give a little informal reception at my house this afternoon, and I want you to come there and sing for my company."

Emily's bright eyes opened to their widest extent.

"Jimminy!" she ejaculated, "I don't believe I could sing a bit."

"And why not, pray?"

"Why, I'd get scared; I bet I would!"

"I am willing to risk that. Will you come, if I send my carriage for you?"

"Send your carriage for me—me! Oh, come, now, do you want to kill me right off quick? I couldn't stand that."

"Well, will you come your own way, then? I'll give you money to hire a cab, and plenty to buy anything you may need to wear. I do not want you to disappoint me, you know."

"But what would granddad say?"

"Do you think he would object?"

"I'm sure he would."

"Well, there will be no harm in it, I assure you. And, if you will come, I promise you that you shall hear me sing."

"Jimminy, but I'd like to, for it ain't

sure about our goin' to the oppery to-night. Granddad is half sick to-day."

"Then you had better take advantage of this chance. Say you will come. Here is money, all you will need and more. It is all yours. Take it. And I shall look for you sure, at two o'clock. Do not forget."

"Well, I will, if you tell me honest that it's all right."

"You will be perfectly safe in my house, and you can be home again by a little after four."

"Then I'll come. You kin look for me, and I won't fool ye."

"Thank you. You will not be sorry, for it will make your name known to the very best people of your city. But besides this, I wanted to say that I would come in and see your grandfather to-night, after six."

"Good enough! I'm glad you're comin', for I want him to see you. He is of the opinion that you are about n. g., but I tell him I know better, and I want him to see for himself."

The woman laughed.

"All right," she said, "you may tell him that I will be here to-night, sure, if possible."

"And, say, how about that other matter?" inquired Emily.

"You mean the Clayburn case?"

"Yes, you bet!"

"Your friend Monte Cristo has taken it in hand, and has begun to look into it. He believes there is a big fortune for your grandfather, larger than he has any idea of. But, you must keep it secret that he is working for you."

"You say he is my friend?" Emily interrogated.

"Yes, he is your friend."

"But, I don't know him."

The woman smiled, perhaps at the child's earnestness.

"It does not matter," she assured; "he is your friend, none the less, and you have my word for it. But, mention it to no one."

The signorina was in a hurry, so she took her leave.

The girl looked at the money she had left on the table, wonderingly.

"If I didn't know for sure that there ain't any fairies," she mused, "I would believe I am in fairy-land now, for sure. Jimminy! but this is the biggest hit of luck that ever struck this house."

Now her spirits were up, and she burst merrily out in song, while she made her work fly in order to get it done and out of the way.

Her grandfather never came home to dinner. Most of the time he took it with him, and occasionally Emily carried it to him, warm.

On this occasion he had taken it with him, and the girl was left free to do as she pleased all day.

When her work was done, she went out and made some necessary purchases in the way of shoes, etc.

About one o'clock she left the house, and two o'clock found her at her destination.

She was promptly admitted and taken to the signorina.

At sight of the splendor of the interior of the house, she almost held her breath, and could not act naturally, but the woman's kindly greeting, and easy manner, went far to reassuring the girl.

"You must not appear frightened," she said, encouragingly. "Just say to yourself that you are as good as the best, and be independent. Think of that Italian monkey, if you want to, to make you spirited."

At mention of Signor Vanzini, Emily laughed.

"If I think of him," she declared, "I sha'n't be able to sing, for laughing."

"Well, don't think of him, then. Think of your grandfather and his mutton-pie. That will be better. But, what I want of you is, that you sing naturally, just as you do at home when you are about your work. Imagine you are there, and

don't think of strange surroundings and strange people."

"Well, I'll try to do the best I can, anyhow. I want to please you, so I'll try hard, you bet!"

"That is all I can ask. And now I will leave you here. When you are wanted, one of my servants will come for you and bring you down to the parlor."

Emily was left alone in the handsome room, and she allowed her eyes to feast to the full upon its beauties.

In something over half an hour a servant came for her, and she was taken down to the parlor.

The signorina met her at the door, and led her forward into the room.

Signorina Vasari had gotten up this musicale as a convenient means of discharging her too many social obligations.

But, what is too often a bore in this line, promised to be a rare treat under the gifted cantatrice. Generally, the strictly fashionable musicale is about as jolly an entertainment as a funeral.

The room was well filled with company, and Emily felt her heart beating wildly, as she was led forward.

At the end of the room she was turned to face the company, and the signorina introduced her, saying:

"Dear friends, here is a little wild rose of song that I found blooming in a shady spot right here in your great city. The child's name is Emily Woolruff, and she lives with her old grandfather in a great tenement down on — street. Knowing what a treat it would be, I have brought her here to sing for you, and it is her very first appearance of any kind."

After saying that, the signorina whispered to Emily what she should sing, and with a pressure of the hand, stepped back and left her.

At first everything seemed to dance before the girl's eyes, and she could not utter a note, but she fixed her mind upon the humble rooms in the old tenement, and in a few moments her rich young voice burst forth.

There were some in the company competent to judge, and these listened with rapt attention.

When the song ended, the encore was vigorous enough to have satisfied even an accomplished professional.

The signorina mentioned another song to the girl, and again the rooms rung with her voice.

"What do you think of the child?" the Queen asked. "I venture to say that with the proper training, she will put to shame anything the musical world has ever listened to."

Many of the company came forward and shook hands with the girl, giving her presents and wishing her well, and so passed a quarter of an hour.

Then the signorina announced that she had promised the child she would sing for her, and rendered a pleasing song.

Emily paid the closest attention to the end, but so well used was she to her own marvelous voice that she could see nothing wonderful in signorina's.

"If that is right and proper," she commented, "I believe I could learn to do it, in time."

CHAPTER XXXI.

EMILY IN THE TOILS.

Vasari's musicale was voted a success, and the success had been Emily Woolruff's, as was conceded. She bore her honors modestly, and when the affair was done, expressed her desire to return home.

Vasari went with her to the door, in person, asking if she should not send her in the carriage, an honor which Emily declined, as before.

"And you are quite sure you can find the way?" the signorina asked.

"You bet," was the jaunty response. "I know New York like a book. I'll tell granddad you're comin' to-night."

"Yes, you may tell him that I will

call on him this evening, before I go to the opera house. Good-by for the present, little song-bird."

Vasari took the girl's hand for an instant; then Emily sprang lightly down the steps and the signorina turned to go back into the house.

Just as she turned, the sharp report of a pistol was heard, and a bullet barely missed her body and buried itself in the frame of the door!

With a bound the gifted singer was out of sight, before the murderous attempt could be repeated.

And, in the same moment, a carriage that had been standing on the opposite side of the street started suddenly off at a rapid pace, turned the nearest corner, and was quickly out of sight.

Another attempt had been made upon the signorina's life!

Excitement prevailed in a moment.

The gentlemen who had been present at the musicale rushed out, but they were too late. The would-be assassin was out of reach.

Vasari took it quite calmly.

The shot had missed her, and that was all she need care about, she remarked.

"But, your life is in constant danger!" cried her guests. "Cannot something be done to bring this wretch to justice?"

"Something will be done, depend on it," Vasari assured. "I thought I was protected, and so I am, to a degree. Who could have foreseen a shot at such a place and at such an hour?"

"You must be on your guard at all times and in all places," warned a reporter who was there to write up the musicale. "Your life is not safe for a moment. Were I you, nothing could induce me to appear on the stage till this fiend is in the hands of the police."

"And then your papers would call me cowardly," the signorina laughed.

"Better a coward than a corpse," commented the reporter. "Refuse to appear, and all New York will join in the man-hunt."

"Better to let my friends join in protecting me," rejoined the signorina. "I am sure no one could attempt to shoot me at the opera without some one seeing his intention in time to balk him. Oh, no, I have less fear there than anywhere else."

"Well, anyhow, I hope the fellow will be taken before he can try it again," the reporter expressed.

"I hope so," agreed the singer, "but I was especially warned to look out for a third attempt, and this was it."

Gradually the excitement subsided, and the company took their leave.

The last editions of the evening papers had a new sensation for their readers. And in them the name of Emily Woolruff was given to New York as the coming American Jenny Lind.

Meantime the girl had gone straight home, and when she arrived it was time to begin preparations for dinner.

Without removing her best, having the possibility of the opera in view, she donned an apron and set to work.

She had barely begun when she heard hasty steps on the stairs, and then along the hall, and finally a loud rap was given upon the door.

Emily stepped immediately to the door, to see who it was and what was wanted, and found herself confronted by a man whom she had never seen before.

"Is your name Emily Woolruff?" he asked, hurriedly.

"Yes, sir, that's me," was the answer.

"Well, your old grandfather is dyin', and I have been sent in a hurry to take you to him."

"Granddad dyin'!" Emily almost screamed.

"Yes, and you ain't got a minute to lose," said the man. "He wants to see you p'tic'lar bad, and I've got a cab to take ye in."

Frightened and grieved, Emily threw off her apron in all haste, caught up her hat and wrap, stepped out of the room,

and locked the door and followed the man down to the street.

Just as they were leaving the house, they were met by an Irishwoman who was coming in.

"And phwenever are yez goin' in sich haste, darlint?" she inquired.

"Oh, granddad is dyin'!" answered Emily, "and he has sent this man to bring me."

She ran right on, sprang into the cab, and the man, mounting to the box, drove off immediately, leaving the old woman gazing after them.

"Poor ould mon!" she mused, "his toime has come at last."

The cab rattled along hastily, and for the first few minutes Emily paid no attention to the direction it was going.

Presently, though, she looked out, and seeing that she was not being taken in the right direction at all, called out to the driver to stop.

There was no answer, but the cab went faster, if anything, and growing alarmed, Emily tried the door. It was fast, both were fast, being fitted with new spring catches.

Now thoroughly frightened, the girl shouted loudly, pounding upon the upper part of her strange prison with all her might to attract attention. Still there was no response, and the cab made no sign of stopping.

In the top of the cab was a hole about an inch in diameter, newly made. The girl discovered this, and was looking about to find something with which to poke the driver through it, when suddenly the mouth of a bottle was applied to the hole and a liquid was poured into the cab.

Instantly Emily felt a sensation of suffocation, and sank down upon the seat. In a few moments more she was unconscious.

She had been neatly trapped, and was now in the power of her enemies, or soon would be!

The cab rattled on, making a long and wide detour, but finally coming back to within a few blocks of the place from where it had started.

It drew in to the curb in front of an Italian lodging-house of the better sort, if such can be said of it.

And there it stood, the driver making no move to get down from his place, and no one offering to get out.

Those standing around looked at the cab at first, but it soon had no interest for any one.

Still the driver remained motionless, and a policeman sauntering along paused to exchange a few remarks with him.

So passed ten minutes or more.

Finally a thin, wiry-looking, hawk-faced man came along, and he stopped in front of the house, looking around idly.

A few minutes later an alarm of fire was heard, and smoke was seen pouring from the upper windows of an old house about a block away on that street.

Immediately all was excitement, and every eye was turned to the scene of the conflagration. Engines soon came tearing along, and the usual excitement attending a city fire was at its height.

Then, and not until then, two men came out of the house, carrying a blanket, and the thin, wiry-looking, hawk-faced man opened the door of the cab and got in.

The blanket was handed in to him, and he put it around the form of the unconscious girl and handed her out to the two men.

They immediately carried her into the house, while the cab went off, the rascally Sharpe remaining in it.

The whole thing had been carefully planned. The fire was but an incident in the general scheme.

When she came to, Emily found herself in a half-darkened room. She was lying on a lounge, and a woman was seated near her, looking at her.

"Where am I?" was Emily's first question.

"Ha! you hafe come to," observed the woman.

In a moment it had all flashed into the girl's mind, and she started up.

"Tell me where I am," she cried, fiercely. "Where is my grandfather, and why was I not taken to him?"

"Hold-a on! hold-a on!" said the woman, getting up. "You will-a faint again if you excite-a yourself so. You hafe been seek, and—"

"I know better!" Emily cried. "You are lying to me! Let me out of here at once, or I'll scratch your eyes out! Let me out, I say, or I'll curl your hair for you, free of charge, you bet!"

She sprang up as she uttered the words, but found that she was weak and dizzy, and sank back again.

"Keep-a yourself cool, my dear!" said the woman. "Eet will be better for you eef you do. I will go and send-a Signor Vanzini to you."

Signor Vanzini!

Emily's heart stood still.

She was in his power, then, and no one to help her to escape!

By the time she recovered from the shock, the woman had gone, and she could do nothing but wait.

But once let her get her strength back again, she resolved in mind, and she would see whether the woman could keep her there or not.

In about ten minutes the door opened and Vanzini stepped into the room.

"Ah! my little song-a-bird," he greeted, "how do you like-a your new home? Eet ees ze best I hafe to offer you now, but soon-a you be with me in my palace in Italy, where you be so happy and free like-a you—"

"See here, you old Eytalian monkey, you!" cried Emily, interrupting, "I want you to let me out of here, and that double-quick, too! If you don't, you will hear somethin' drop, you bet! Get out of my way, or I'll punch your ugly old mug till you won't know yourself in a look-in'-glass!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SIGNORINA TAKES HOLD.

Anthony Burry wended his way homeward slowly and wearily, and as he neared the old tenement, his gait became more slow and weary still.

"I hate to do it, really hate to do it," he muttered to himself, "but it is all for Emily's good. I feel ashamed of myself, but I'd be more ashamed still if I took that child to sich a wicked place."

By the time he got up the stairs he was just able to stand. Every step was made with an effort, till he reached the door, when he took hold of the knob.

Greatly to his surprise, however, the door refused to open, and wondering where his grandchild could be, he livened up wonderfully, and knocked.

No response.

He knocked again.

Still no answer, of course.

Now alarmed, he dropped his box and chair and stooped to the keyhole.

More to his alarm, he found that the room was all dark, and that there was no sign of life within.

"Wherever kin the child be?"

Setting his box and chair against the door, he turned and went down to the next floor.

Knocking at a door on that floor, it was opened by an Irishwoman—the same one who had met Emily when she was leaving the house in company with her abductor.

At sight of him the woman screamed. "Sure! isn't it dead yez are?" she demanded.

This served to puzzle the old man more than ever.

"What do you mean, Mrs. McCune?" he inquired.

"Sure, Emily wint off in a hurry in a cab, and she tould me at dhe dure dhat you was a-dyin' and had sint fur her."

"Good heavens!" the old man gasped,

"what can this mean? I sent no such word to her at all, Mrs. McCune. What does it mean?"

"Divil a bit can Oi tell you, sor."

"How long ago was it?"

"Not more nor an hour and a half ago."

"And she went in a cab?"

"She did dhat same."

"Which way did the cab go?"

"Up dhe street, sor."

"And who was with her—anybody?"

"Nobody but dhe gully phwat drove the cab."

"And did you know him?"

"No, sor."

Old Anthony was deeply troubled. This was more than he could grasp.

He was an old man, and in his excitement he lost sight of the leading points for the moment, and saw only Emily's absence.

Suddenly they came to him with redoubled force, however, and he recalled the fact that she had been duped by some one who had told her that he was dying and had sent for her.

And with that came the truth of the situation. Emily had been deceived and taken away forcibly!

With a gasp he turned and almost staggered down the stairs.

Hurrying out to the street, he took off his hat and passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

"I wish Gabriel was here, I do wish Gabriel was here," he muttered to himself.

Just then a policeman came along, and seeing the old man's queer actions, stopped to inquire the trouble.

"What's the matter, old man?" he asked.

Anthony started up, and seeing who the questioner was, grasped his arm.

"My little grandchild has been kidnapped, that's what is the matter," he exclaimed. "You must find her for me!"

"What's this, somebody carried off?" the officer interrogated.

"Yes, yes, my grandchild has been lured away by somebody," the old man urged. And he told all about it.

"This must be looked into," commented the officer. "Just describe her to me, if you can."

The troubled old grandfather did so to the best of his ability.

"I'll report it at the station," said the officer, "and we'll see what can be done toward finding her."

He went off, leaving the old man alone to his sorrow.

Anthony went wearily up to the door of his rooms again, and now nearly the whole hive was out into the halls.

Mrs. McCune had spread the news, the same as she had spread the report of the old man's illness, after Emily had gone off in the cab, and it lost nothing in the telling.

The Irishwoman suggested to him that he try the keys of other rooms and see if he couldn't unlock the door.

This the old man agreed to, having little power to think for himself, and in a few moments a key was had that opened the door for him.

He staggered in, and soon lighted a lamp, for it was dark.

Emily was not there, and that one awful fact was forced home to his heart, and he sunk upon a chair, weeping.

The others pressed around the door, some coming into the room, and for the next ten minutes there was a running fire of comment and surmings.

In the course of the talk some one mentioned Signor Vanzini.

It was known to all that he had been making himself ridiculous in his attentions to Emily.

At mention of his name Anthony Burry was upon his feet in an instant.

"It's that skunk of a Eytalian, that's jest who it is!" he cried. "I'll go and him arrested, and that in a minute."

He started for the door, when he caught sight of Gabriel Weeks, who was just pushing his way in.

Gabriel had a paper in hand, and appeared greatly excited.

"What in the world's goin' on here?" he inquired.

"Oh, Gabriel," cried Anthony, "Emily's gone!"

"Emily gone?"

"Yes, gone, and that 'ere skunk of a Eytalian has took her. But, I'll have him arested, and that in a minute."

"Mebby it wasn't him, though; mebbly it wasn't him a tall," Gabriel disputed. "Jest let me read to ye what's in the paper, Ant'ny, boy. As it can't be no secret, seein' as it's in the paper, I'll read it out to all."

Everybody there was in the greatest excitement of curiosity to hear.

Gabriel opened his paper to the place he wanted, and read the account of the musicale, given by Signorina Vasari and of the appearance there of a wonderfully-gifted child of New York—Emily Woolrouff. And then followed the account of the shot fired at the signorina.

"What do you think of that, Ant'ny boy, what do you think of that?" the old man asked, as he concluded.

"I don't know what to think, I don't know what to think," mused Burry, all in a fog. "Emily has fooled me, has fooled me! She didn't tell me she was goin' there."

"When I seen that in the paper," explained Gabriel, "I couldn't stop for no supper, but came right over here. I wanted to see Emily and hear all about it. But she's gone, and where is she?"

"It's that 'ere skunk of a Eytalian, that's who it is!" Burry insisted. "Let me only see him, and if I don't jab him, I don't know what jabbin' is, that's all! Why, I'll—"

But he cut short his threat.

Just then he caught sight of an elegant lady at the door.

"What's all the excitement about, my good sir?" she inquired, respectfully.

"My grandchild is missin', that's what, ma'm," the old grandfather answered. "She's gone."

"What!" the lady cried, and it was Vasari, as she pressed into the room. "has your grand-daughter not returned home yet?"

Her tone was full of anxiety.

Gabriel guessed aright, and whispered to his friend.

"Say, are you the woman Vasari, who had my Emily at your house this afternoon, ma'm?" Anthony demanded.

"Yes, I am she," the signorina owned. "Is it possible that the child did not return here after she left my house?"

"What time did she leave there?"

"A little before four."

"Yes, she has been here since that," Burry explained; "but now she's gone, and I believe it's that 'ere skunk of a Eytalian what's took her!"

At this point Vasari took hold of the matter with a firm hand.

"I must consult with you alone, sir," she said. "I know your friends will not be offended if I ask them to withdraw. It is all for the child, you know, my good people," she addressed them, and laying hold on the door, she motioned them out.

All went meekly and without question, all save Anthony's old friend.

The signorina looked at him, as though expecting him to go, too, but Gabriel moved not.

"Oh! I see," the woman suddenly exclaimed. "You are Gabriel."

"Yes, that's who I am," Gabriel owned, "and me an Ant'ny is one, when there is trouble to bear."

The woman promptly closed the door, and the three were alone.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MONTE CRISTO'S NEW ROLE.

Signorina Vasari sat down.

"My friends," she spoke, "what is to be done?"

"I don't know, oh, I don't know," moaned old Anthony, sadly.

"Emily must be found, that's what is to be done," put in Gabriel, forcibly.

"Yes, she must be found," agreed the signorina. "And I am going to take it upon myself to find her."

"Heaven bless ye if you do!" cried Anthony. "She is my life to me, is Emily, and I couldn't live without her. Oh! she must be found!"

"And she shall be found, too," cried Gabriel, "if I have to hunt New York over and over. No brighter little angel ever lived than what Emily was, ma'm, and that is the truth."

"I am aware of it," the signorina agreed. "I love her, I love her for her voice, and I will restore her to you, sir," to Anthony, "if it takes every dollar I have in the world. But, do I understand you have notified the police about it?"

"Yes, I told a policeman about it," answered Anthony, "and he said he would report it at his station and have it looked into at once."

"That is not enough. I will go immediately to Headquarters and urge the importance of the matter, and then I'll engage the services of the best private detective to be found in the city."

"Will you do that?" cried Anthony.

"Of course I will do it."

"Then you do wish my Emily well, and not harm?"

"Assuredly I wish her well, sir. I came here to-night to talk with you about her welfare. But, there is no time now. I will go immediately. There is nothing you can do but wait. Within half an hour I will have detectives after her."

"God bless ye!" both the old men exclaimed.

"And I suppose your grandchild has told you that I am interesting myself for you in that Clayburn affair?" the woman remarked.

"Yes, she has told me," Anthony responded; "but don't talk about that now. I don't care a cent for the fortune, if I kin only get Emily back."

"I suppose not, but I wanted to tell you that there is every prospect for your getting a million dollars out of it. More important, though, I want to warn you to be on your guard. There is a plot afoot to wrest this fortune from the rightful heirs, and your life is hardly safe."

The old man looked alarmed as well he might.

"My life not safe?" he exclaimed.

"No, it really is not. You must be watchful."

"And mebbys this is the reason Emily has been taken," he suggested.

"That thought has struck me," responded the signorina. "I do not know. It is undoubtedly that, or it is the Italian. But, I must make haste. You can do nothing, so wait patiently to hear from me."

She had risen while speaking, and now with a bow she opened the door and disappeared.

For some moments the two old men looked at the door without speaking.

The grandfather was the first to do so.

"I believe she's honest," he remarked.

"I do believe she is, Ant'ny, boy, I do believe she is," Gabriel agreed.

And so they fell into talking, still in the guarded tones the signorina had employed.

In the meantime the signorina had entered her carriage, and was being driven rapidly to Police Headquarters.

Entering, with as much certainty as though she had been there before, she inquired for the officer in charge, and was shown to his place.

To him she stated the matter clearly and forcibly, and requested him to take immediate action. She mentioned the suspicion against Signor Vanzini, but said nothing regarding her other suspicion.

"And that is all you can tell us?" asked the officer, when she had done.

"That is all," the signorina assured.

"It is enough. We will take up the matter at once, and see what can be done toward finding the lost girl."

"Thank you," said Vasari. "And now will you give me the name and address of one of the best and most honorable private detectives you know of in the city? I have another matter which I desire to put into private hands."

The official complied with the request, naming one of the best-known private detectives of the day.

Vasari returned her thanks, and, re-entering her carriage, was driven rapidly to another part of the city, to the residence of the detective to whom she had been directed.

Knowing that she would not find him at his office, she had not gone there, but to his home instead. And she was fortunate enough to find him in.

This detective was the renowned Duke Daniels.

As soon as the signorina's name was mentioned to him, he made haste to present himself.

"An unexpected honor, Signorina Vasari," the detective greeted.

That he recognized her did not surprise the signorina any. Her face was familiar to everybody.

"I am here on business," Vasari said, hurriedly, "and my time is limited. In twenty minutes I must be on the stage. I want to engage your service, sir."

"In the matter of finding the rascal who has been trying to kill you?"

"No, no, not that at all. Can you serve me? If so, I will lay the case before you. If not, then I must hasten to some one else."

"I can serve you, and will," was the prompt assurance.

"I am glad to hear you say that. And now for the matter you are to look into. But, first, have you seen in the evening papers the account of the little girl who sang at my reception this afternoon?"

"Emily Woolruff. Yes, I read the account."

"Well, Emily Woolruff has been stolen from her home, and I want you to find her and restore her to her old grandfather. You have read about the matter of the Clayburn fortune?"

"I have."

"Emily Woolruff is one of the heirs. It is possible that she has been abducted by Hector Browden and his rascally helper, Detective Sharpe, to remove her out of their way. Or, it may be that she has been taken by an Italian named Vanzini, who has been wanting her to marry him. This latter, however, I have put into the hands of the police. They will attend to him, so you can give your whole attention to the other clew. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, madam."

"I want you to make it your first business to find the girl. That done, I desire you to attend to Browden. I have taken in hand the matter of securing the rights of old Anthony Burry and his grandchild to them, and I am convinced that Browden and his man are plotting to rob all the heirs and reap the fortune themselves. This they must be balked in. Take the matter up very quietly, and report to me as soon as you learn anything."

"You interest me," Daniels acknowledged. "I will do as you request, and will set out immediately to begin search for the missing girl."

Some further particulars were brought out, and the signorina hastened away.

When she reached the opera house she was none too soon to appear on the stage on time.

The evening passed without incident out of the usual, and as soon as the last act was rendered the signorina went home.

At an hour considerably later a dark form entered the building in which was situated the office of Hector Browden, passing up the broad stairs as quietly as a shadow.

As though accustomed to the way, or at least acquainted with it, the figure went straight to the door of this office, and there stopped.

Waiting a few moments, as though listening, a key was thrust into the lock and the door opened.

The person passed in, closing and locking the door after him.

Once within, the light of a bull's-eye was flashed around the office, as the visitor surveyed it. The person was clad in black, wearing a caped cloak and a black hat of the slouch order. He looked the typical burglar, so far as matter of dress was concerned.

When he had looked around to his satisfaction, he produced keys, and opened easily the drawers of a desk.

He evidently found nothing of interest, for he presently closed and locked all the drawers as he had found them.

Next he turned his attention to the case of pigeon-holes, which occupied a place on the wall, about the same as it had in the old office when Hamman was alive.

Taking papers from some of the holes, he looked at them, replacing them in order.

Presently an exclamation escaped him. Turning to the desk, he put down the lantern and examined the paper he had in hand.

"The rascals!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "Here they have the whole of the record, from first to last."

Turning back to the case, he took out paper after paper, now guiding his hand by the letters which marked the holes, and in a few minutes he had all he desired.

"How they will rave when they find the papers gone!" he laughed to himself, as he made them into one package. "And how they will wonder who has taken them! Little will they dream that the robber was Monte Cristo, the 'petted lion,' as the papers are pleased to call me."

The documents made into a compact package, it was thrust into a pocket, and the doors of the case were locked.

Then, turning out his light, Monte Cristo for it was he, opened the door of the office.

Pausing to listen, and hearing no one, he closed the door after him and hurried out of the building and away from the vicinity.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CLEVERLY FOILED AND CLEVERLY TRAPPED.

To return to Emily Woolruff.

The bold stand she had taken checked Vanzini. He had expected to find her in tears, but he found her in arms, so to say.

"Would-a you harm ze man who love you?" holding out his hands imploringly.

"You come one step nearer," answered Emily, as she laid hold of a chair, "and you will find out. I'll knock your head off, sure."

"But-a, you must marry me! Then I will-a dress you in silk and diamonds, and give-a you more money than you can spend. You shall-a be ze lady grand, ze honored wife of ze Count Vanzini."

"Count nothin'!" retorted Emily, in disdain. "You get out of the way now and let me out of here, or I'll screech in a way that will make you think the house is afire. Come, git a move on ye, or down ye go, and that I'm tellin' ye! Out of the way!"

Emily had now picked up the chair, a light one, and swinging it around her head, she made a charge upon her enemy.

Vanzini hesitated for one moment, but he saw that the song-bird meant business and wisely retreated.

He dodged out of the door and closed it just in time, for the chair came down upon the door with a crash and was completely wrecked. Had it come down with the same force upon his head, he

would have thought his song-bird was a whole orchestra of cracked instruments.

Locking the door he made a hasty retreat to the region below, where he sought the consolation of his landlady.

"She is a little fury, a little devil!" he told her in Italian. "I don't see how I am going to overcome her."

The woman laughed.

"I can help you do that," she said. "A day or two with nothing to eat and then a quieting powder; that will make her do your will."

And so it was arranged that the woman was to have charge of the girl and manage the matter her own way.

Barely had they come to this understanding, though, when Emily was heard uttering scream after scream in a way that was calculated to arouse the neighborhood.

"Curse her!" cried the woman, as she ran out and sprang up the stairs. "I was a fool to leave her free in my house! I will vex her so she will be quiet or I will kill her!"

Unlocking the door, she opened it, when she was suddenly sent reeling against the wall, and out Emily sprang!

She was off down the stairs like a frightened deer, and would have made good her escape but for Vanzini.

He was in the hall on the next floor and drawing a knife began to flourish it to and fro, warning the girl to stop or she would feel its keen blade.

This awed the runaway and she stopped, but immediately began to scream again, determined to bring help if possible.

Suddenly a door below was dashed open, and two men came running up the stairs in haste.

Emily hoped they were friends, but she was mistaken. They were the two rascals who had carried her into the house.

In a moment the villain Vanzini had directed them to seize the girl, and she was carried back to her prison.

Vanzini now repaired to his room, and when next he made his appearance he was in disguise as an old man. So clever was his make-up that his landlady did not recognize him at first.

"It is all right now," he said to her in their own language. "Now, let the police come as soon as they will. Ah! but my friend Gillam is a wonderful man! Not with a month of study could I have planned so well."

And the rascal had not adopted his disguise any too soon.

By eight o'clock came a man asking for Vanzini.

"Ah, he ees gone-a," said the woman, in all earnestness.

"Gone where?" was asked.

"Ah! How I know-a zat? He haf gon-a with ze lady he marry."

"Married! The count married."

"Ah, yes; he marry these afternoon, here in mine-a house, and he go away as soon-a as he marry."

The police detective, for such the man was, looked troubled.

But he was not to be easily balked.

With a quick movement the detective caught hold of the woman and snapped a pair of handcuffs upon her wrists.

"You are lying to me!" he exclaimed. "You have got to tell me the truth or to prison you go."

This unexpected move startled the woman, and the ruse might have been successful, but just then the matter took another turn.

A man came hurrying to the house, and as hurriedly asked for Count Vanzini.

He was a thin, wiry-looking, hawk-faced man, but with a scraggy white beard that hid his identity.

"He ees gone-a," she declared. "I know, not-a where he go. Ah! tell-a these gentleman I do not-a know where he ees."

"Then I'm too late!" cried the old man, flying into a seeming rage. "He

owes me a bill, and I heard just now he had gone on the steamer that sailed at six o'clock. I came right here to find out if it's so. Cuss all Italians anyhow, says I!"

The police detective was fooled.

Releasing the woman, he turned his attention to the man.

"How did you learn that Vanzini had gone?" he inquired. "I am looking for him, too."

"Ha! he owes you, too, then, does he? Oh, but he was a sleek rascal, he was! Why, a friend of mine who knowed I had trusted him said he saw him go aboard the steamer with a young girl with him just before the plank was pulled and the ropes cast off. I guess we are out on him, sure."

With a muttered imprecation, the officer turned away, setting out to report to his superior.

Sharpe, for it was he, set off in the opposite direction, and in a few minutes had removed the false beard from his face.

"Curse the luck!" he muttered, "why didn't I foresee this? It came to mind too late, but I was in time to block that police fellow, anyhow. I might have known suspicion would make it hotter for Vanzini than he could stand. Now he has got to get out, soon as he can."

Sharpe went around the block, came right back to the house, and went straight to Vanzini's room.

"Who is there?" the Italian asked.

"It's Gillam," Sharpe answered.

The door opened immediately and Vanzini, in his disguise, was there.

Sharpe entered, closing the door after him.

"You have got to get out of here within an hour," he said. "One of the best detectives in New York is soon coming here, and if you are here you will be discovered as sure as fate. Your disguise won't save you. You must skip, and that by a back way, too. You can easily find a hiding place. But, mind, if you are taken you don't want to say that Gillam helped you. If you give me away I'll kill you, that is all."

Vanzini looked terribly frightened.

"But-a," he cried, "where I go to?"

"I don't know," said Sharpe. "You will have to go it alone, for there isn't time for me to help you now. Get out some back way, take the girl with you, and hide in some other place. The two men who helped you before will help you come out all right—maybe. But I'm off."

And with that Sharpe was off.

Through his men he had learned of the visit of Vasari to the old tenement, and then her going to Police Headquarters and thence to the residence of Detective Daniels.

Not twenty minutes had he been gone from the house when a gentleman called there.

"I want to see Count Vanzini," he whispered very confidentially to the landlady. "I must see him right away. Tell him it is about the girl, and he will know who I am."

The woman was bewildered, and knew not what to say.

"Come, you must hurry!" the gentleman urged. "There is not a minute to lose. I know all about it, so go quick. It is all right."

"Well, I will-a see eef he ees in," said the woman. When she went up stairs he went right on after her.

She knocked at the door of Vanzini's room, saying something in Italian, and the door opened.

Instantly Duke Daniels, for it was he, sprang forward, a revolver in hand, exclaiming:

"Surrender! you miserable dog! or down you go!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE HEIRS MADE KNOWN.

The Italian staggered back.

With a bound the detective was upon him, and the false beard was torn off.

"A pretty clever trick, my fine fellow, but it don't work," he cried.

Retreating across the room, the Italian uttered a loud cry for help, at the same time drawing a knife and flourishing it.

"That won't help you any, either," warned Daniels, with a light laugh, and he put a whistle to his lips and sounded a piercing signal.

In a moment the door below was flung open, and hasty steps were heard in the hall.

"This way!" cried the detective, and in another moment two men were in the room.

"Handcuff that fellow," Daniels ordered, and Vanzini was their prisoner.

The landlady, during this time, had stood by as though paralyzed, and the detective ordered her to be also taken into custody.

"Now," he demanded, "I want to know where that girl is."

"I know-a not v'at you mean," declared Vanzini.

"No use of your lying! I know better."

"Ve hafe no girl here," supported the woman.

"No use telling us that," declared the detective. "I will search the house."

Taking one of his men with him, the detective went out, revolver still in hand, and began a search of the house.

Italians were in the halls, and looking out from the doors of the rooms, but they offered no further resistance.

Daniels proceeded from room to room, till finally he came to the one where the girl was imprisoned.

Here the locked door raised his suspicion immediately, and putting their shoulders to it, he and his man pressed it open.

Their search was rewarded, for there on the lounge lay Emily, bound and gagged.

She was speedily released, and was soon on her feet.

"Much obliged to you!" she returned thanks. "Now let me get hold of that old Eyetalion monkey, and see if I don't make him sick. Where is he?"

"He is all right; I will take care of him," answered Daniels, smiling. "You may go right home to your grandfather, and this man will go with you to see that you get there safely."

"All right, and I'll be right off," assented Emily, "fer granddad will be awful worried about me."

The detective gave some instructions to his man, and he and the girl set out.

When they had departed, Daniels and his remaining man marched their prisoners downstairs.

"Now," said the detective, "you go for the police, and I'll stay here till you come back, and—"

Just then the door swung open, and half a dozen policemen trooped in.

Not satisfied with the first effort made, the night chief, after the visit of Vasari, and the report of the detective who had been fooled by Sharpe, had resolved upon searching the house.

"Daniels! you here!" exclaimed the sergeant in charge.

"As you see," the detective answered, "and here are your prisoners."

"And what about the missing girl?"

"I have rescued her and sent her home."

"Good for you! You have got ahead of us this time, sure."

"Only in point of time," was the rejoinder. "You would have discovered her now, had I been later."

The prisoners were marched away, while Daniels and his man took their leave in another direction.

Meantime, Emily had reached home, where she brought joy to the heart of her old grandfather.

The detective did not leave them, saying he had been ordered to remain to protect the girl from another possible attempt.

Next day five persons in New York received an interesting notice.

It was from some one unknown, and it told the five that they were heirs to the great Clayburn fortune!

It told each of the five who the other four were, and assured them that they were the only heirs living. It also warned them of the plot against them, and that they were in danger.

Further, it stated that the matter would be placed in the hands of one of the most prominent lawyers in the city, giving his name, and that it would be to their interest to appear and make themselves known to him. Proof of their identity would be in his hands.

There was no signature to the communication.

Three of the five heirs, as may be imagined, were greatly surprised, and these were Dalorme, Dentway, and Miss Blarcome.

Within an hour after the receipt of the mysterious notice Henry Dentway gave a tug at the bell of Lewellyn Dalorme's lodging, and asked for him.

Dalorme happened to be in, and Dentway was soon in his room.

"Well, I have got it, Dalorme!"

"So have I!" was the response.

And they shook hands and exchanged congratulations.

"But, do you believe there is anything in it?" Dalorme asked. "And what did you mean to say you had got?"

"Your last question first. I meant to say I had got onto the secret of that offer of marriage we both received at nearly the same time from that woman."

"Ha! then you believe she knew of this, and wanted to come in for a share of the wealth by marrying one of us?"

"Beyond a doubt. She is some relation to Browden, you know, and I believe it is he who is trying to cheat us out of our rights."

"Not a doubt of it! But do you believe there is anything in it?"

"Of course I do. Don't that woman's desperate effort to get hold of one of us prove it?"

"You are right. But, what are we to do? Shall we go and see Miss Blarcome?"

"Just what I had in mind to propose, and then all of us go and get Anthony Burry and the girl and make a procession to the lawyer's office."

"Agreed! Oh, I am in a fever now, I tell you! Never dreamed of anything of this sort coming my way."

"Neither did I. Let's be off, and lose no time about it."

"I'm with you."

In a little while they were at Miss Blarcome's home.

As soon as their names were announced she admitted them into her presence.

"Have you received a peculiar notice this morning?" inquired Dalorme.

"Yes, I have," was the excited response, "and I know that you have, too, and that is what has brought you here. Am I right?"

"You are right," Dalorme assured. "It seems we three are related in some way, though we never knew it."

"But do you think it is really true?" the lady asked, eagerly.

"Pretty certain it is," answered Dentway.

"It is undoubtedly true," answered Dalorme, and, stating the errand that had brought them there, asked the lady to accompany them to the lawyer's office.

She could not be ready under half an hour, but would meet them at the office. But to this Dalorme offered an amendment. He, or Dentway, either, he said, could go and get Burry and the girl, while the other could wait and accompany Miss Blarcome.

Dentway set out forthwith, and in due time was at his destination.

He found old Anthony at home, as the warnings he had received had deterred him from going out to business as usual.

The detective had taken his leave, but, unknown to any one, another was watching the house.

The reporter found the old man and his grandchild talking about the note they had received.

Dentway made known his business, and the old knife-man agreed to the plan.

Half an hour later they made their appearance at the office of a prominent lawyer, where Dalorme and Miss Blarcome had already arrived.

And here all of the surviving heirs of old Howell Clayburn met for the first time in their lives. And they were shown proof of their identity, which the lawyer had in hand.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AT THE END OF THEIR ROPE.

Previous to this, that lawyer had had another visitor—being none other than "Prince" Monte Cristo.

Shortly after the lawyer had arrived at his office, the "Prince" entered and made himself known.

"I want to engage you upon an important case, sir," he stated, when he had introduced himself.

"And what is the case?" asked the lawyer.

"It is the Clayburn will case."

"Ha! how are you interested in that?"

"Personally I have no interest in it," answered Monte Cristo, "but I am taking the matter in hand for the rightful heirs."

"And their name must be Legion. I consider it a case that will never be settled."

"On the contrary, sir, there are only five living heirs, and I can furnish proof of their identity."

"You amaze me!" the lawyer cried. "If you can do that, sir, each of them will come into a million, at least."

"And I can do it, sir. But, first of all, will you take the matter in hand? If not I must go somewhere else."

"Of course I'll take it in hand," was the prompt assurance. "State the case and give me the names of the heirs and the proofs you claim to have. I will open the matter immediately if I find you have a case."

Monte Cristo went ahead then, and made revelations that astounded the honorable member of the New York bar.

"And you say you have these papers in your possession?" the lawyer asked, as soon as the "Prince" had done.

"Yes, I have them in my possession," was the assurance.

"And how did you get them?"

"I stole them."

"What!"

"Exactly so, sir. I played the burglar last night, if you will call it so, visited the office of this rascal, and there found the proofs."

"Well, that was one way. But, let me see them."

The papers were handed over, and the lawyer looked at them critically.

"They are straight," he commented, "and old Hamman has made good work of the record. The old rascal! he could have settled the whole case years ago, if he would. Take the case? Yes, sir, I will, and be proud to make the rascals disgorge."

"Good enough, sir! I have notified these heirs, but have not revealed my identity to them, and have told them to call on you. I was sure, you see, you would take the case in hand. They will call on you, I presume. And I have warned them, too, to be on the lookout for danger."

"A wise precaution. Yes, I will begin action at once, and in a short time the affair can be settled."

That same morning Hector Browden was seated in his office, drumming impatiently on the desk.

"I wish Sharpe would come!" he muttered. "I suppose everything is all right, but I want him to tell me it is. We are bound to win; can't help it, that I can see, but I want to know how that matter came out last night."

While thus muttering the door was flung open and Sharpe entered.

One glance at his face was enough to show that something had gone wrong.

"What's up?" demanded Browden.

"The devil's to pay!" cried Sharpe.

"What is it? What has happened?"

"That girl has been rescued already, for one thing," was the answer.

"Rescued? How was it done?"

"Through that opera singer, confound her!"

"But, how did she get hold of it so quick? Come, tell me all."

"Well, it seems she called on old Burry just about the time the girl was missing. She asked questions, of course, and Burry directed suspicion at once to Signor Vanzini. What did the woman do but go at once to Police Headquarters, and then to get the help of Duke Daniels—and I'd rather have Satan after me. He made a raid on old Vanzini's den at once, scooped him in, and rescued the girl."

"Well, that was bad for the Italian, but of course we can't come in for any share in the matter."

"I don't know about that. This thing is beginning to look dubious, I tell you."

"What more has gone wrong?"

"A mighty good deal has gone wrong, and nothing but the promptest kind of action will save us. This whole bubble is just in shape to burst, and nothing but the promptest kind of action will save it, as I said. You have got to make a hasty jotting of the record our man Sweet is to use, and then every other paper must be destroyed, this very hour."

"What! destroy all that record! You are crazy!"

"Am I? I guess you'll find I am sane enough. By some means or other that devil of a Monte Cristo has got hold of all the heirs—"

"What! How—"

"Hang your questions! I don't know how; I only know it's so. He has paid a visit to the office of Lawyer Beltford this morning, and now every one of the heirs are there, all together. What do you think of that? With Detective Daniels and Lawyer Beltford after us, I tell you we have got to wash our hands, and that in a hurry, too. Those papers have got to be burned."

Hector Browden was pale to the lips.

"I wonder how they ever found out who all the heirs are?" he questioned.

"I can't understand it."

"I don't know. All I know is that we are on dangerous ground, and that those papers have got to be out of the way. Come, get them out, so we can draw off the names and dates we require for Sweet; then the rest must be burned."

"But, what is the hurry—"

"Confound you! can't you see that Daniels is likely to swoop down on you at any minute?"

Browden was frightened, and with trembling hand unlocked the case of pigeon-holes.

As he opened the door he fell back with a cry.

"Good heavens!" he gasped, "they have been stolen!"

For a moment neither spoke, but gazed at the empty spaces in the case of holes.

Sharpe was the first to break the silence.

"That settles it," he observed, calmly. "The jig is up, and there is no way out of it for you, Browden."

And on the instant, and greatly to Browden's surprise and consternation, Sharpe snapped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

"W—what do you mean?" Browden gasped.

"I mean that you are my prisoner?" was the answer.

"Y—your prisoner! What—have you been playing me? But, no—"

"That is just it," Sharpe assured. "I have let you have all the rope you wanted, and here you are."

"But you went in with me," insisted

Browden, in despair. "You agreed to help me carry out the game for half a million, if we succeeded—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the cunning rascal, "that was the bait I caught you on, my fine fellow. Come, get on your hat, and we'll take a walk to the station," and Sharpe displayed a revolver.

Browden began to argue the point and to storm at his false friend, but in the midst of it the door opened and Duke Daniels came in with one of his men.

"Ha! hello, Daniels!" greeted Sharpe, smilingly. "You see I am ahead of you on this lay, old fellow."

"So I see," observed Daniels, looking around keenly. "Upon what charge have you arrested him?"

"On the charge of killing his uncle, old Hamman."

"Have you proof of that?"

"You bet!"

"Good for you!" Daniels congratulated. "Give me your hand. What proof have you got against the scamp?"

Sharpe rattled off the points that are known to the reader, adding that Hamman had always been his friend, and at his death he had vowed he would hunt his murderer down, if murder it had been.

"You are a keen one, and no mistake," declared Daniels, at which Sharpe beamed with pride. "Give me your hand again, old man!"

Sharpe took the hand offered so friendly and freely, but, the next instant he was sorry for it. Duke Daniels closed upon Sharpe's hand like a vise, bringing the treacherous double-dealer to his knees with a groan, and with the other hand took away his weapon.

Then Sharpe was handcuffed, and was no better off than was his intended victim.

"Quite a clever play," remarked Daniels, with a smile, "but it don't go down with me. I have got the dead-wood on you, and there is no room for you to get out of the net. You are a pretty pair, but your race is run."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHAT IS THE MYSTERY?

The Conspirator Detective squirmed and protested, but it was of no use. Daniels had him "dead to rights." He had come to the end of his lane.

The pair were marched off to the nearest station, where charges were preferred against them, and they were sent to jail.

An officer had been left in charge of Browden's office, so that nothing could be taken away or anything destroyed. And so ended the scheming scoundrel's artful conspiracy to get hold of the Clayburn millions.

In the meantime the rightful heirs to the fortune had finished their business with their lawyer, and had gone away with the assurance that there was nothing in the way of their coming into the fortune that had been willed to them, and its accumulated proceeds.

The news of the arrest of Browden and Sharpe soon spread, and when Henry Dentway went down to the office of his paper, some time later, he heard all about it.

Interested in the matter as he was, he set out at once for the Tombs to see the two scamps, and heard what they had to say.

They were in separate cells, so could not communicate with each other, and both were sullen and dispirited.

Browden would not respond to questions, so Dentway turned to Sharpe.

"Well, friend Sharpe," he greeted, when he looked in upon him through the bars, "it beats the—the old gentleman below, don't it?"

"Look here, Dentway," the rogue urged; "I'm an innocent man, and I want you to give me a hearing in your paper. I am placed in a false light in this affair." And forthwith he set out upon a story that would have taken up a column, had the reporter bothered with it.

That afternoon the papers had a sensation.

The great Clayburn affair was written up at length. Old Hamman's rascality was exposed; then his murder by Browden; then the big scheme that Browden and Sharpe had set in motion for securing the millions for themselves.

That the five heirs were objects of congratulation on every hand may be surmised.

Particularly did it interest Dianthe Marxham and Laurence Weldron, who knew that by their folly they had barred themselves from a share of the honors these riches were to bring to the two they had so meanly jilted.

But, blinded as they still were by their infatuation for the "Prince" and the "Queen," they could not realize this fully, yet.

There was an awakening in store for them, however, and not for them only, but for all Gotham.

The evening following the events last recorded saw the opera house crowded. Vasari appeared, bringing forth a storm of applause that had in no wise grown less with time.

The first act ended; there was an intermission, and the second act began.

Vasari had been on the stage but a few moments, and her voice was ringing through the vast inclosure like the purest bell, when, suddenly, a pistol-shot was heard, and the last note ended in a cry of pain!

The prima donna staggered toward the wings, and would have fallen had she not been caught.

Immediately following the shot, a man sprang out of the box nearest the stage, ran across the stage, and disappeared behind the wings on the left.

For one moment no one moved or spoke. Then went up the awful cry:

"Vasari is killed!"

The audience at once became wild with rage and excitement. Men rushed upon the stage, and crowded through to the rear, in pursuit of the assassin.

But, they were too late. The rascal had made good his escape, for the time being, at least. He had knocked down the man at the door and sprang out, and was gone.

Yet, swift as he had been, he did not escape sight of a man in black who had been the first in pursuit, from the wings of the stage.

Three other men in black had taken possession of the signorina, and, regardless of all questions and all protestations, had carried her out through the rear, put her in a carriage, and dashed away in the direction of her home.

No one knew how badly she was injured, or whether she was living or dead. It had all taken place in the shortest possible time, and no particulars were to be had in any direction.

Henry Dentway was present, and while the attention of everybody was toward the stage, he had hurried out the front way.

But even haste was slow progress, and by the time he reached the street, and had entered his cab, the wounded signorina was almost home in her carriage. When he arrived there, the singer had been borne into the house, and the carriage was gone.

The reporter sprang up the steps, and rang the bell. The door was opened, after a delay, by a man in black.

"How is Vasari?" Dentway asked.

"Badly wounded, but not fatally!"

"Will you give me the particulars?"

"The bullet entered the lady's mouth," was the reply, "tearing her tongue and passing out through her neck. Vasari will never sing again!"

A few more questions were asked, and the reporter went away, hastening to the newspaper office to write up the sensation.

A declaration of war against Uncle Sam could not have occasioned more of a stir in New York than did the news that Vasari had been robbed forever of her voice!

Then went up the cry for the assassin. He must not be allowed to escape. He must be punished for his dastardly crime!

Nor was this all the excitement, for the forenoon had not passed when it was rumored that Monte Cristo had taken leave of New York.

Reporters who hastened to his house found it closed, and a notice up that its furniture, etc., would be sold at auction at a given date.

Here was a sensation, indeed! And it was said at once that the "Prince" was the one who had fired the cowardly shot.

Detective Daniels, already in the employ of the Song Queen, in another matter, was looking for her assassin.

No sooner did this information come to him than he proceeded immediately to the auctioneer whose name was on the house.

"What do you know about the sudden disappearance of this man?" he demanded.

"Nothing," was the answer, "except that he sent a man here, putting everything in his house into my hands, to be sold and the proceeds turned over to some charitable institution."

"And you don't know where he was going?"

"Haven't any idea."

Questioning brought out nothing.

The detective's next move was to pay a visit to the house.

There a surprise awaited him and the police, for he was now working with them.

Not a thing of the "Prince's" personal effects was to be found! All his trunks were gone, and everything indicated that his going had been arranged days before it was known.

Nothing but the furniture and what pertained thereto remained. And this, more than anything else, led the officers to believe that the "Prince" had indeed been the person who had sought the life of the songstress.

If this were indeed the case, the detectives reasoned, the signorina must certainly know that it had been he, and through her he must be found, if at all.

Accordingly, Daniels and another detective repaired to her house, but admittance was positively refused to them, or to any one else, for that matter.

Going back to the residence, later, and alone, he gave his name and directed the man at the door to inform the signorina that it was of the utmost importance he should see her.

The door was closed and locked upon him while the message was being delivered, a circumstance that made the detective all the more curious.

When the man returned to the door he offered the detective a roll of money, with the word from the signorina that, as she knew he had performed the work she had given him, she had no further need of his services. She could not see him, neither then nor at any other time.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

REVELATION ADDS TO THE MAGNIFICENT MYSTERY.

Duke Daniels was a puzzled man.

He was on the point of refusing the money, but the servant thrust it upon him and closed the door.

Balked again, the detective turned away, opening the roll of money as he went to see what it contained, and he found it to be five hundred dollars.

But, he found something more.

With the bills was a written note, requesting him to drop the matter right where he was, as it would be useless for him to try to get at any secret that might be tempting his investigations.

In truth, the note was of a warning nature, though not clearly implied, and it only served to make the alert detective the more determined. He meant to unravel the secret—dispel the mystery if human ingenuity could do it.

Clever as Duke Daniels was considered, this case was too much for him, so far, but he had not by any means given up. And another who was more than passingly interested in it was Henry Dentway.

One great fact was patent to all. Vasari and Monte Cristo had disappeared from New York as suddenly and mysteriously as though they had been taken up into the air and off to some other world.

Early in the forenoon another auction flag was out, this time at the house that had been occupied by the singer. And the detectives noticed that it was the same man who had charge of Monte Cristo's property.

Setting his men at work, Duke Daniels unearthed some points.

First, Vasari and Monte Cristo had bought their houses at about the same time, and of the same landlord, but through different agents.

Next, two other houses had been rented on that same day, on the street that separated the blocks on which the Vasari and Monte Cristo houses were situated. And here was the first straight clew to the wonderful disclosure that was to be made.

That Vasari's house and Monte Cristo's had been in the same neighborhood had occasioned no comment. They were two blocks apart, facing opposite ways, and with a street between. Communication from one to the other, secretly, had not been dreamed of. It was seemingly impossible.

But, was it impossible? Two other houses, facing each other on the street that ran between, had been rented about the same time that Vasari and Monte Cristo had made their purchases.

Duke Daniels informed the police of his suspicion; an examination was begun immediately, and startling discoveries resulted.

From the rear of Monte Cristo's house to that of the rented house behind it, was a connecting gate. The next house, that is, this one in the rear of Monte Cristo's, was not furnished, nor had it been. The one opposite, too, was destitute of furniture, or appeared to be, at first sight. From the rear of this second house to the rear of Vasari's was another connecting gate!

The truth was plain. Monte Cristo and Vasari had been more to each other than the world had ever suspected. Ay, they had been more to each other than the world ever would guess, or know.

These discoveries only added to the mysteries.

People in the houses adjoining the two that faced each other on the street that separated Vasari and Monte Cristo, in answer to questions put by the detectives, said they had seen a man cross from one house to the other, back and forth, at all hours, night and day, and that sometimes he had appeared to be in a hurry. More, they had seen the servants of the houses, on both sides, go back and forth.

A general view of the matter had, the detectives went into a particular hunt through the two buildings.

And now was made the most astounding discovery of all. In a partly furnished room on the ground floor, a room that showed signs of having been used more or less, lay the body of a man.

He was a tall, dark person, and it was decided immediately that he was a foreigner, either a Frenchman or an Italian. And, strangest of all, his breast showed twelve wounds where a dagger, as it was taken to have been, had pierced his bosom as many times.

But, still adding to the marvel of the mystery was the note that was pinned to his breast. It set forth the truth that this was the man who had fired the mysterious shots at Vasari, and whose last shot had been so nearly fatal.

This note was signed—"By order of Vasari," and its ending words were—"So dies the wretch who has stilled the voice of the Queen of Song."

CHAPTER XXXIX. THE TRUTH REVEALED.

New York detectives searched in vain for the inner wheel of this mystery of mysteries, but never found it, nor will they ever find it. It dies with Vasari.

What they did discover, by patience and hard work, may be summed up in a few lines:

They learned that a private steam yacht left New York Harbor on the night of the disappearance of Vasari. Whose it was they knew not, then. That yacht was eventually traced to Italy. There it landed the signorina, her servants, and all her personal effects. But it did not land Monte Cristo.

And there to-day lives Signorina Vasari, unable to sing, and barely able to talk, owing to her frightful wound. She is surrounded by faithful servants, some of whom were with her in New York.

Detectives have visited her, to learn something of Monte Cristo, but in vain. She will tell nothing. Perhaps legal proceedings would have been begun, to force her to tell, but the police of New York received letters from Italy, in the "Prince's" own hand, assuring them that he lived.

And so the mystery stands to-day, so far as the world is concerned. Only a few persons know the truth, and they are sworn to the silence of honor and fear.

But on us is no oath of secrecy nor enforced silence, and we proceed to the end with this startling revelation.

To do this we invite the reader once more to that dimly-lighted room mentioned in the "entr'acte."

It is the night that saw the disappearance of Vasari from New York. Thirteen figures in black—No, there are only twelve in black. The other is lying on a couch, pale, weak, undisguised. It is Signorina Vasari!

Before her, in the midst of the twelve, stands a man who is a prisoner.

Vasari is unable to speak, owing to her wound, but one of the twelve speaks for her, he having evidently been well instructed what to say.

"You cruel wretch," he says, addressing the prisoner, "you well deserve the fate that is to be meted out. You are doomed to die. Because Vasari would not hear your tale of love, you threatened her life. You were warned, time after time, but you would not heed. At last you have succeeded in wreaking your vengeance; but it were better for you that your shot had been fatal. You have ruined the voice of Vasari; your life must pay the penalty. Have you anything to say?"

Then from the lips of the prisoner was poured forth a tale of the love and maddened jealousy that had urged him on to the deed. And he was loud in his cursings of Monte Cristo. It was only to seek his life, he declared, that he would ask to live.

When he ended, Vasari nodded to her spokesman.

"You poor fool," said he, to the prisoner, "know the truth, since it can do you little good now, whoever you are—duke in disguise, as we suspect you really are. Vasari and Monte Cristo are one and the same!"

The prisoner paled, looked closely at the signorina, and the truth suddenly dawned upon him. He grew infuriate as a wild beast. He tried to escape his bonds to end the deed of blood he had so well begun, and then to slay himself—frenzied as he was by the astounding imposture and his inconceivable blindness and folly.

"Curse you for the double role you have played!" he cried. "Would that I could get at your throat! Duke I certainly am—but wrecked, lost in the mad scheme to win her I now curse and abhor!"

"The signorina imprecates herself for her masquerade," responded the spokesman, "but her heart does not soften toward you, seeing how great an affliction you have wrought upon her. Here and now you must die—that we have decreed."

As he said this, the man placed his sword against the prisoner's breast, his eleven companions doing the same, and, at a nod from the spokesman, they were plunged into the unprotected breast of the would-be slayer.

The prisoner sunk to the floor, dead; the swords were put away, and the signorina was lifted and borne out, almost in a dead faint of horror and distress. The terrible revenge for the terrible affliction was accomplished.

What! exclaims the reader, Vasari and Monte Cristo one and the same? Impossible!

No, not impossible, but the fact. Nowhere in the preceding pages can be found anything incompatible with this dual life of the Queen of Song. If Monte Cristo met Vasari, it was not she, but some one playing her part. And it was the same if taken vice versa.

When their carriages collided on the avenue it was not Vasari, but one of her maids, veiled, playing the role. And again, at the masked ball. It was not Monte Cristo in the box, when Vasari was singing, but a servant playing his part. And afterward, when Monte Cristo appeared, the woman passing for Vasari was not she, but her Italian confidante.

That person was shot in the arm, true, and Vasari had to carry out the deception at her next appearance, by coming before the public with her arm bandaged. It was a deep game, and played with marvelous daring and skill.

And the object? Who can say what it was? The riches that came to Vasari by her matchless voice were freely spent by Monte Cristo in such pleasures as were barred from him in his other role.

Vasari was Monte Cristo, and Monte Cristo was Vasari, but what the rightful name of this remarkable woman was, no one can say. Even in her own home she is a mystery, but that she is a Princess of truly queenly lineage is as assured as the sealed records of the old House of Colona will permit of attestation and proof.

CHAPTER XL.

REWARDS AND RETRIBUTION.

Our romance ends; the Clayburn case was settled—the heirs received their rights—justice did its beneficent duty well.

Lewellyn Dalorme and Josephine Blarcome were married in due time, and were glad of the escape they had had from other fates.

Henry Dentway is waiting for Emily Woolruff, who is at present away at school acquiring an education and learning to sing "right and proper"—a beautiful because noble character and a nature of rare promise.

Anthony Burry, contented and happy, with Gabriel Weeks for his constant companion, is eagerly awaiting the day when his beloved grandchild will come home to him again, and he can see her and her lover happily wed.

Of the rascals—or, rather, execrable villains—of our play, the truth can be inferred.

Hector Browden was tried, convicted as he deserved, and sentenced to be hanged, and only escaped the gallows by strangling himself in his cell—a tragic end to a base life.

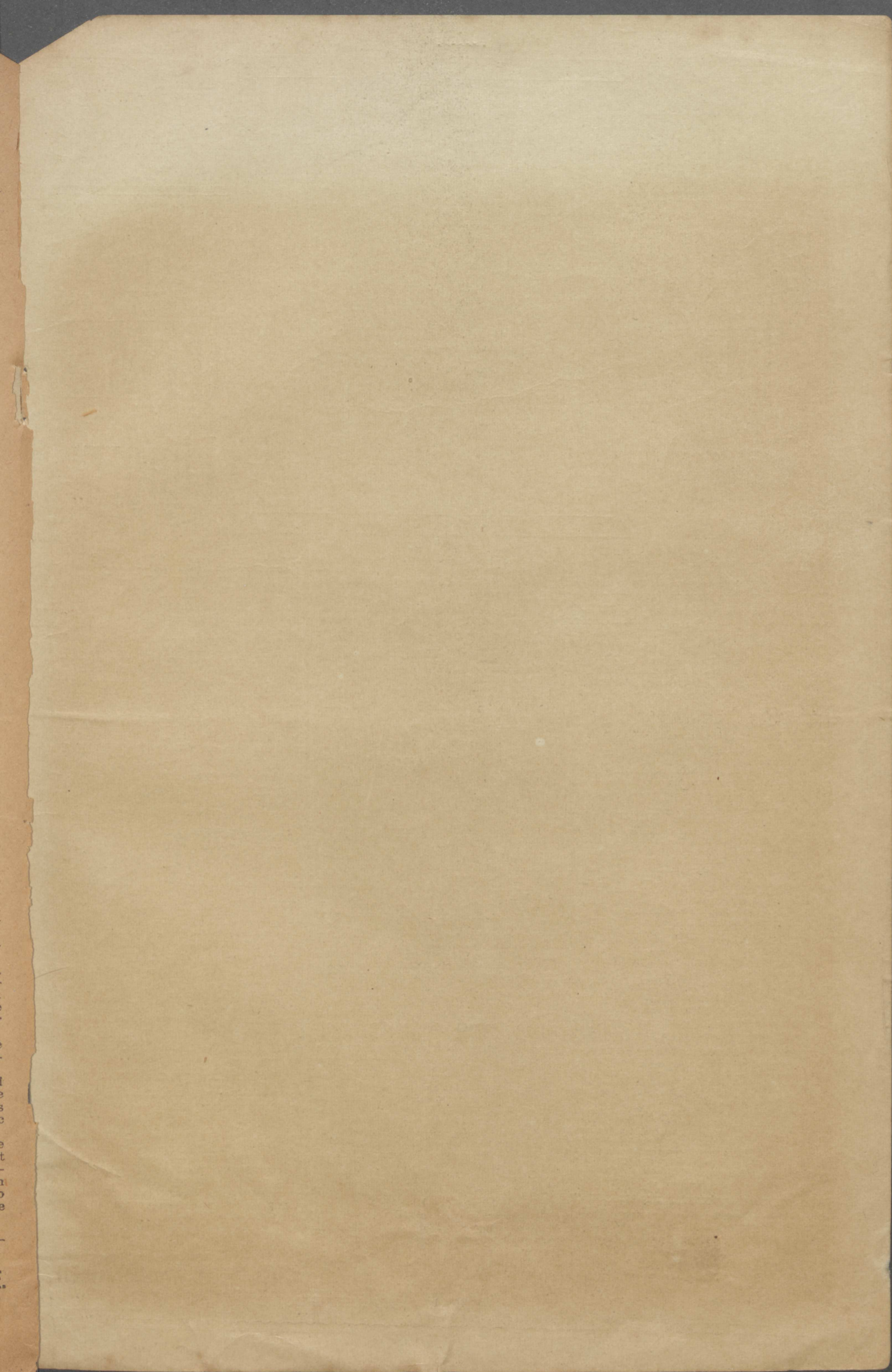
The Dastard Detective is wearing the stripes, and exercising his muscles at breaking stone, as is also "Count" Vanzini, the Italian scamp, and of whom this country holds and harbors only too many as bad as he—so much the worse for the country!

THE END.

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